

Sunday December 1, 2024
First Sunday of Advent

Meditation: "Hope"

In Jeremiah's day the superpower of his time, the Assyrians, had been displaced by the Babylonians, and the Babylonians were on a roll. Topple a kingdom here, occupy a country there, and the kingdom of Judah was not spared. By this time the northern kingdom of Israel had long since fallen to the Assyrians and the people scattered to the four winds. The southern kingdom of Judah was all that remained of the children of Jacob. Anyway, Judah was invaded and occupied, Jerusalem was ransacked, Solomon's temple was stripped of its gold and its furnishings before it was torn down to the ground. The people were taken into exile in foreign lands, away from their homes, their lands, their lives, their God. The leadership of the country was taken to Babylon to be converted into good little Babylonians.

There was plenty to mourn. Worse than being taken into captivity was the destruction of the temple and the end of the monarchy. They had been **the** two tangible signs of God's presence with the people of Judah. The temple was where God resided, lived with them. The king was the one who administered God's justice; God's righteousness. Without those two, all was lost. The people could not conceive of worship without the temple. The people could not conceive of the administration of God's justice without the monarchy. The people could not conceive of a life outside of the promised land. The people could not conceive of a future without God's presence. They were a people living in deep darkness; a people without hope.

Almost 600 years later, in the days leading up to the birth of Jesus the people of Israel had returned to Judah and Jerusalem, and they had rebuilt the temple, but they were a people living under occupation by a foreign power. Without a monarch of David's line sitting on the throne and ruling the nation, the people felt that God's justice was not being administered. In fact, having to pay taxes to both the temple and to Rome meant that many people felt there was no justice. This double taxation caused many to sell their lands, and even sell themselves and their families into slavery in order to pay the taxes. There was no thought of not

paying the Roman taxes. That would land you in slavery, or in the arena, unarmed. The only possible option was to pay only the Roman taxes and be branded a sinner, or worse, by the High Priest and the Pharisees. Being branded a sinner, considered to be impure, meant that one was not entitled to enter the temple court to worship God. Some choice: starvation, slave, martyr or sinner. They were a people living in deep darkness; a people without hope.

In our day, there are many who are disillusioned. Some are certain that climate change will wipe out life on earth in the next few decades, and the intervening years will be increasingly inhospitable. Some feel disenfranchised, like global integration has cost them too much. They are people in some parts of the world who long for a return to the superiority of empire. They are people in other parts of the world who feel that they and their land have been stripped of anything of value to make others wealthy, while leaving them economically and environmentally bankrupt. Some are in such pain from the injustice of the systems of the world that they have turned to addictions of one kind or another. Others are lost in a world of their own, barely surviving with untreated mental illness. And still others are trying to cling to life in war zones in Syria or Ukraine, Somalia or Gaza, Sudan or Yemen, and elsewhere. They are people living in deep darkness; a people without hope.

Some have become economic refugees, migrants who move from country to country in search of employment. Others have blamed governments and have started or joined uprisings and when that doesn't work, they are attracted to groups like Hamas, or a Neo-Nazi group, or a nationalistic militia, or ISIS, or, you get the picture. When they visit terror on others, we too live in darkness; the darkness of dread and fear; and in fear we deny God's justice, God's righteousness, to those in need; to those who are fleeing the destruction and violence in their homelands, those who simply want to be freed of their demons, or those who just want a safe, warm, dry place to sleep at night. And in denying God's justice, we fail to truly worship God.

Jeremiah spoke to a people who were being carted away into captivity and made known God's promise to them. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

In those days, and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” The promise is that regardless of the political and military machinations of men, God’s justice will not fail to be done, neither will God fail to be present to God’s children. Jeremiah offered hope to those who felt hopeless. Hope for a return to the land, hope for restoration of the temple, hope for a Davidic King to administer God’s justice, hope that God had indeed not forgotten or abandoned them.

Into occupied Israel, Jesus was born. When Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry, he delivered a message to the people. Jesus was letting them know that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, God was still with them and that divine justice could not be denied, even if it wasn’t practiced by their rulers. Jesus came to offer hope to those who felt hopeless. Hope for a future where there would be divine justice for all and where peace would reign, hope that God had neither forgotten nor abandoned them.

There has been increasing rhetoric in the news lately, news that hasn’t been this vicious for four years, about rapists and murderers and drug dealers illegally invading North America from South and Central America. The reality is that most of these migrants are good people fleeing gang violence, grinding poverty, and lack of opportunity in their homeland. They are people just like us; people who want to work and live in peace; people who want to raise their children in peace and who want opportunities for their children and their children’s children. And yet, some brand them an invasion force; striking fear in the hearts of North Americans.

Once Jeremiah spoke a word of hope to the people. Once Jesus was born to deliver a message of hope to the people. Now it is our turn to create hope for those who feel there is no hope. When we act to support those fleeing violence, warfare and terrorism; when we act to support those with addiction or mental health issues; when we act to provide the necessities of life, like food and housing; when we act to live with respect in Creation, God uses us to create hope in the hopeless.

Jeremiah knew; Jesus knew; God knows that an ounce of hope is more powerful than a ton of despair, so let us provide hope to those in our world who live in deep darkness, the people without hope. Amen.