

Jeremiah 33:1-16 (NET)

The Lord Promises a Second Time to Restore Israel and Judah

^{33:1} The LORD spoke to Jeremiah a second time while he was still confined in the courtyard of the guardhouse. ^{33:2} “I, the LORD, do these things. I, the LORD, form the plan to bring them about. I am known as the LORD. I say to you, ^{33:3} ‘Call on me in prayer and I will answer you. I will show you great and mysterious things which you still do not know about.’ ^{33:4} For I, the LORD God of Israel, have something more to say about the houses in this city and the royal buildings which have been torn down for defenses against the siege ramps and military incursions of the Babylonians: ^{33:5} ‘The defenders of the city will go out and fight with the Babylonians. But they will only fill those houses and buildings with the dead bodies of the people that I will kill in my anger and my wrath. That will happen because I have decided to turn my back on this city on account of the wicked things they have done. ^{33:6} But I will most surely heal the wounds of this city and restore it and its people to health. I will show them abundant peace and security. ^{33:7} I will restore Judah and Israel and will rebuild them as they were in days of old. ^{33:8} I will purify them from all the sin that they committed against me. I will forgive all their sins which they committed in rebelling against me. ^{33:9} All the nations will hear about all the good things which I will do to them. This city will bring me fame, honor, and praise before them for the joy that I bring it. The nations will tremble in awe at all the peace and prosperity that I will provide for it.’

^{33:10} “I, the LORD, say: ‘You and your people are saying about this place, “It lies in ruins. There are no people or animals in it.” That is true. The towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem will soon be desolate, uninhabited either by people or by animals. But happy sounds will again be heard in these places. ^{33:11} Once again there will be sounds of joy and gladness and the glad celebrations of brides and grooms. Once again people will bring their thank offerings to the temple of the LORD and will say, “Give thanks to the LORD who rules over all. For the LORD is good and his unfailing love lasts forever.” For I, the LORD, affirm that I will restore the land to what it was in days of old.’

^{33:12} “I, the LORD who rules over all, say: ‘This place will indeed lie in ruins. There will be no people or animals in it. But there will again be in it and in its towns sheepfolds where shepherds can rest their sheep. ^{33:13} I, the LORD, say that shepherds will once again count their sheep as they pass into the fold. They will do this in all the towns in the southern hill country, the western foothills, the southern hill country, the territory of Benjamin, the villages surrounding Jerusalem, and the towns of Judah.’

The Lord Reaffirms His Covenant with David, Israel, and Levi

^{33:14} “I, the LORD, affirm: ‘The time will certainly come when I will fulfill my gracious promise concerning the nations of Israel and Judah. ^{33:15} In those days and at that time I will raise up for them a righteous descendant of David.

“‘He will do what is just and right in the land. ^{33:16} Under his rule Judah will enjoy safety and Jerusalem will live in security. At that time Jerusalem will be called “The LORD has provided us with justice.”’

Hope Preached from Prison

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Jeremiah 33:1-16*

A couple of months ago I told you the story of a student minister from some years ago. He asked the children if they knew what a prophet was. One student eagerly responded it was what you had left over after you bought something at one price and sold it at a higher one. Spelling makes all the difference. We all laughed, and I don't remember much after that. And that leaves begging the original question, what is a prophet, spelled prophet?

In ancient times as in ours, prophets were often thought to predict the future. They seemed to have special powers, or some special connection with God or the supernatural. They saw into tomorrow. Many envied the power of prophets. They thought that if you knew what tomorrow holds, you would have a great advantage. Imagine if you knew who was going to win tomorrow's horse races or what stocks were going to go up 10 percent. You could make a fortune. Our language itself conveys how we see it. We mean they have supernatural powers, so we say they can divine the future. We imagine the riches their power could give us, and we call them fortune tellers.

The truth in both ancient and modern times is a little different though. Prophets have not been so much crystal-ball gazers as they have been people who can see in the present. Prophets can see clearly the moments they are living in, and they can see the obvious consequences. It's not a supernatural power. It's the ability to see clearly and honestly, without denial, what's going on today and what the implications are.

It's this seeing the implications of the present and this representing what they see without denial that makes prophets so extraordinary. It's also what gets them into hot water. Jeremiah lived in one of the most dramatic moments in ancient Israel's history. Israel stood in the middle of powerful civilizations. To the south lay Egypt. To the north, Assyria. To the east, Babylon. To the west, the sea. As the fortunes of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon rose and fell, Israel was literally caught in the middle. Her few moments of autonomy came when those at her compass points were taking a breather. But most of the time, one of them was conquering another, and Israel was trampled by the armies and then subjected to the conquerors.

In this precarious situation which Israel found herself, it required a delicate, perhaps an impossible, set of political instincts to maintain the country's integrity while staying out of trouble with her conquering neighbors. Jeremiah's moment was one of the most thorny ever in Israel's history. Assyria to the north was waning, but still an empire. Babylon to the east was rising. Egypt was strong, but she needed to join with the weaker of Assyria or Babylon to maintain a balance of powers. So, Egypt had once been allied with Babylon, but Babylon's rise was now threatening. So Egypt was changing her support to Assyria. Israel's kings were grossly ineffectual in this game of political hardball. To state it most simply, Israel's kings were so fearful that they effectively put their hands over their eyes. They lived in denial so deep that they could not permit themselves to accurately assess the dangers they were in. They found it

more palatable to build a foreign policy on fantasy than to see the reality.

Along comes Jeremiah. Jeremiah, a prophet, unpolluted by denial, can see clearly what is going on. By the time we get to today's passage, Jeremiah sees clearly that Babylon is going to sack the city, that all is lost. He quotes his prophecy from God: "The defenders of the city will go out and fight with the Babylonians. But they will only fill those houses and buildings with the dead bodies of the people that I will kill in my anger and my wrath." But Jeremiah's warnings have been rebuffed. Indeed, Jeremiah is now in jail for treason. His words of reality have been interpreted as unpatriotic.

It's hard to miss the analogies with our own time. Our time's prophets warned that Iraq had all the earmarks of becoming another Viet Nam, but the government was in denial, and it ridiculed the prophets. The human causes of global warming are taken as fact by most people today. But those who profit from its causes label the prophets who sound the warnings as anti-American crazies. Live in denial and call the prophets unpatriotic; it has a long, sad history.

It's too bad. It's too bad, because most prophets are driven by love and hope for their native lands. Jeremiah loved Israel. Modern American prophets are mostly loving patriots. Indeed, the prophets, old and new, are marked by their incredible hope even as they preach dire consequences. In fact what marks the difference between the prophets and their contenders is that the prophets' hope is strong enough to survive reality. Denial is the practice of a hope based in fantasy, because it is not strong enough for reality.

Martin Luther King knew that racial discrimination was bad for America. He knew that to break it would be a hard and conflict-ridden path. But always he saw where it was going, always hope inspired him. In April 1963 he wrote from the Birmingham jail to those who criticized his protests, and especially to those who praised the police. He said:

I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face Jeering, and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: "My fleets is tired, but my soul is at rest." They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers. In all that King did, he was motivated by a future that would see America at her best.

So it is with Jeremiah. In all his caustic rhetoric, in all his predictions of sorrow and gloom, Jeremiah sees beyond it to a time when life will prosper. On behalf of God he says, "I will most surely heal the wounds of this city and restore it and its people to health. I will show them abundant peace and security."

He looks toward a time when the normal rhythms of life will be restored, "Once again

there will be sounds of joy and gladness and the glad celebrations of brides and grooms,” he says.

It is not an accident that Jeremiah becomes the spokesperson for us on this first Sunday of Advent. Jeremiah’s promises become our own in this season. They look forward to a son of David. “I, the LORD, affirm: ‘The time will certainly come when I will fulfill my gracious promise concerning the nations of Israel and Judah. ^{33:15} In those days and at that time I will raise up for them a righteous descendant of David.’”

These words have double-meaning for us. They point to the birth we celebrate, the Christ come into the world, Jesus born to Mary and Joseph two-thousand years ago. But of course, we look forward to that birth in every age. For in every age we find ourselves gripped by denial and as befuddled as Israel’s kings were. In every age, we are served by prophets who see with clarity and wisdom, prophets who more often than not make us squirm in our seats with discomfort, but prophets who more than anything else are animated by hope, by a vision of restoration. In Advent we are called to walk with them, for in their walk we learn that to face the darkest part of ourselves is the first step in keeping hope alive. It is the season to leave the flimsy world of fantasy behind and to walk into the sturdy world of a robust hope. So may it be. Amen.