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First Presbyterian Church of Athens
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Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-18, Matthew 16:13-16

The Days Are Surely Coming

This time of year, the days are getting shorter and the nights are getting longer. It's fitting that the liturgical season is Advent when we are symbolically waiting in the dark for the coming of the light, waiting to celebrate the birth of Christ, to be sure, but also awaiting his return.

Waiting in the dark. There are times in our lives when we are waiting in dark, when every ray of light has been snuffed out, and all feels lost. A marriage dissolves and with it the dream of happily ever after. Dark. A couple's first pregnancy ends in miscarriage and the crib remains empty for years. Dark. A house burns down and, with it, treasured art and furniture created by family members. Dark.

At a recent Stephen Ministry training session, we brainstormed types of losses that cause people to grieve: death of a loved one, unemployment, disappointment with a child, declining health, giving up driving, an empty nest, moving away, failure at something big, loss of status, loss of independence, loss of financial security, loss of a way of life. We named 23 but could have kept going. There are so many circumstances which can turn out the lights and cause us to dwell in darkness.

Darkness can descend not only in our personal worlds, but also in the public sphere. Things look bleak when we look around the globe and see unrest and war, unprecedented numbers of displaced people, species going extinct at alarming rates, million going to bed hungry. It's equally dismal to see here in the land that we love violence and crime, abuse and racism, generational poverty and rancorous civic discourse, not to put too fine a point on it.

It's easy to despair. In fact, that is perhaps the sane response.

Today we pick up the story we have been following this autumn, the story of Yahweh's chosen people in the Old Testament, and today they are despairing. It is 587 BCE. Ever since the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms, north and south, following the death of King Solomon, both kingdoms have been falling off the Yahweh wagon, so to speak. Like a backsliding alcoholic, there have been a few short-lived reforms, but nothing ever sticks. Baal worship is ever popular, morals take a back seat to expedience, and kings bet on foreign alliances rather than trust in the Lord. In 722 BCE the Northern kingdom succumbed to Assyria. For nearly the past two decades, Judah, the Southern kingdom, has been a vassal state controlled by the powerful empire of Babylon. Now Judah is on the brink of collapse as Babylonian expansion marches forward.

The prophet Jeremiah saw it coming. For the past 40 years in stinging oracles and anguished sermons he has begged for a return to the Lord and to the ethics laid out in their covenant with Yahweh, or else ruin would ensue. For 40 years Jeremiah has decried the idolatry, railed against persistent dishonesty, wept over the oppression, deplored the abuse of power, and agonized over neglect of the vulnerable. Kings and priests, prophets and people

alike were in his sights. But what tippler wants to hear a party pooper say, Lay off the booze? Jeremiah's impassioned pleas have fallen on deaf ears. For all his efforts, Jeremiah reaped mockery and threats. Once he was even cast into an empty cistern and left to starve. Additionally, Jeremiah has suffered what felt like a burning fire in his bones, this having to bear the Word of the Lord, which was for so long message after message of doom and gloom.

So, it's 587 BCE and the "or else" is breathing down Judah's neck. The Babylonian army has laid siege to Jerusalem. Desperation has set in as supplies are cut off, food is scarce, and buildings are dismantled to use as raw material to defend against Babylonian siege ramps.ⁱ It is obvious that in short order the Babylonians will prevail. Jerusalem will fall. The city will burn. Masses will be slaughtered; the temple, destroyed; the king, deposed, blinded, and marched off with the upper classes to a foreign land. Indeed, all will be lost. It is a dire situation which falls like a pall upon the people of Judah. Defeat and exile are nigh. The piper must be paid, and the cost is exorbitant.

At this point Jeremiah is under house arrest by the king for his perceived disloyalty.ⁱⁱ So as a national disaster is unfolding, Jeremiah himself is in a personal crisis. It is into the midst of this despair that God speaks.

The Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, we read, while he was confined in the court of the guard. Instead of telling Jeremiah to prophesy destruction as God had for decades, this time the Lord told Jeremiah to buy a field from his cousin.

"Pay good money for a field when real estate is about to be worthless?"

"Yes, and seal up the deed in a long-lasting jar because there will be a day when houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." So, Jeremiah sent for his cousin and did as told. That's Jeremiah, chapter 32.

Then the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time while he was still confined in the court of the guard. That's Jeremiah, chapter 33, and it too is a word of hope. Out of the blue, as it were, out of God's mercy, God promises to restore the fortunes of Israel and Judah. God will forgive their sin and rebuild Jerusalem. In this wasteland where the streets are abandoned and no one, human or beast, is left standing, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and voice of gladness. There will be weddings and singing, people worshiping God with thanks and shepherds tending their flocks in the pastures.

God continues with good news as we get to our text for the morning which comes in verse 14: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made with 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."

You see, back when David ascended the throne, the Lord promised David an eternal dynasty. There would always be someone from the Davidic line reigning. Of course, one of the biggest consequences of the Exile was the extinction of a nearly 400-year dynasty. The promise of God seemed to have ended. In 587 BCE, it looked as though all hope was lost.

But the Word of the Lord to Jeremiah, the Word of the Lord to the people facing Exile, and the Word of the Lord to us is that *God is faithful*. In the darkest hour come the hopeful divine words, "Surely the days are coming." The house of David might be cut down. The night

might seem endless. But God is able to bring life out of death. God is able to bring light out of darkness. A branch will grow from the stump.

We have a banana tree in our backyard. From the first frost until spring, it's an ugly, brown, decaying clump of stumps where it's been hacked back. You would swear that it's finished. But along about April, an amazing thing happens. A green shoot sprouts up, with a furled tender leaf, a shoot that will grow as tall as the house.

Historically, the Davidic line did not return when the exiles came home from Babylonian captivity. So, texts like this one from Jeremiah were in time interpreted to point to a future messiah. When, centuries later, Jesus appeared on the scene, he was identified as the anointed one—the Christ—the One who fulfilled God's promise, a descendant of David who was a savior not just of Jerusalem and Judah, but of the world. His coming inaugurated a kingdom marked by justice and righteousness, just as God pledged.

The days are surely coming, promises God.

And the dark days of our personal crises do, thanks be to God, give way to brighter times. God reaches into our ruins and rebuilds. From the catastrophes of our lives—whether brought about by our own failings or wrought by bad luck—God is able to bring about something new and quite often something surprising. “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with morning,” says the psalmist.ⁱⁱⁱ

To circle back to where I began this sermon, in my own experience by the grace of God a second marriage has brought me great love and delight. Fertility treatments and adoption have given me two wonderful children. And I just returned from a new mountain house built on the ashes of the family cabin which renters accidentally burned down. The joy of these restorations does not erase the anguish of what came before. And restorations, when they do come, never replicate what was lost. That's because God is always doing a new thing. And, as we know, new is different.

Jesus was certainly different. He was not the sort of king that ruled ancient Israel or Judah. I'm sure he was not what Jeremiah, or anybody else, was expecting. He did not live in a palace and command armies. He was an itinerant rabbi whose followers were an army of lepers, street walkers, common folk, and the disabled. He didn't eat off gold plates or sit on an ivory throne. He ate fish and loaves by the lake and hung out in the homes of his friends. The territory he was interested in ruling was not the rolling hills of Palestine but the human heart.

Looking at the mess of the world we live in, it's clear that Jesus' kingdom, the Kingdom of God has only just begun. We catch glimpses of it, but it's not fully realized. We haven't had the final victory parade yet. We are still waiting to throw the confetti. It's a long wait, but we trust that the days are surely coming when God's promises will finally be fulfilled. So, we wait in faith. We yearn for the time when the darkness of every injustice is banished, and the despair of every unrighteous circumstance is lifted.

Advent is the season of waiting. It is also the season of hope. And so we sing, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” And we light our candles—first one, then two, then three and four until on Christmas Eve, the whole room is filled with candlelight. We light our candles in anticipation of the day when the glory of God sets our whole human enterprise ablaze. In the imagery of the book of Revelation, we wait and hope for the New Jerusalem, the city [which] has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.^{iv}

On this first Sunday of Advent we gather around this Table, set with bread and wine, the body and blood of King Jesus the Christ, the branch God raised up. We gather in remembrance and anticipation, recalling Jesus' life and proclaiming his death until he comes again. And he is coming. The days are surely coming. Amen.

ⁱ Jer. 33:4.

ⁱⁱ "These chapters ("Jeremiah 32:1-33:26) are thematically linked to the 'Book of Consolation (chs 30-31) and are so included here, even though they should follow ch 34 chronologically; they are dated to the very end of the reign of Zedekiah and of the Babylonian siege (588-586 BCE), during which Jeremiah was in confinement." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1111.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 30:5

^{iv} Rev. 21:23