

Reflection—Jeremiah 33: 14-16
(November 29, 2020—1st Sunday in Advent)

I came across a quote this week that struck me as a fitting summary for the scripture reading, it goes like this, “Hope, like faith, is nothing if it is not courageous; it is nothing if it is not ridiculous.” How ridiculous Jeremiah’s words seem in the context of great pain and profound loss. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, are advancing. The streets of Jerusalem would soon be filled with the corpses of her people. The worst had not yet happened, but it was inevitable. Any reasonable person could see that the city was doomed. Jeremiah’s prophecies of doom—prophecies that landed him in prison—were coming true. Yet now, in the midst of catastrophe, the prophet speaks these words of promise:¹

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill 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.” (33: 14-15)

How ridiculous his words seem, how utterly divorced from the reality of a people who are staring at the total absence of any future.²

The Jewish people were and are a people with a memory however. They remember that God had come through for them before. They are inheritors of the stories of a God that is not content to let them languish as slaves in Egypt, of a God that leads them to a land to call their own. Jeremiah’s words, full of God’s great promise of restoration are not ridiculous to the Jewish people, they are legitimate words of hope because they are rooted in their experience; God had come through before, God would come through again. For the Jewish people, hope is based on experience.

By Jesus’ time though this hope is waning, it has been a long time since Jeremiah, and the Jewish people are still under occupation, different occupiers, but occupation nonetheless. Hope, as Jayden Jones says in their Advent prayer must feel like a trap, locking the Jewish people into a fruitless yearning and a helpless waiting. In the context of Jesus’ life this scripture starts to take on new meaning for some Jews. As they try to make sense of Jesus’ life and death and it’s ongoing power in their own lives, they see in scriptures like this one a prophecy foretelling the birth of Jesus. The conclusion they come to, and it becomes a great source of conflict within Judaism, is that the Jewish people are hoping for something that cannot be—a kingdom. Those first Jesus followers look at Jesus and conclude that their hopes had indeed been fulfilled, that God, as God had always does, was doing something new. God raises a very different sort of king from their midst and establishes a very different sort of kingdom. Founded not on the might of a warrior but on the vulnerability of a babe. For Jesus to emerge as the messiah they let go of their

¹ Kathryn Schifferdecker http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=11/29/2009&tab=1

² Dennis Bratcher <http://www.cVOICE.org/lectionary/YearC/Cadvent1ot.html>

notions of what a messiah would be and pay attention to what God is actually doing. Hope is found in letting go and watching, noticing what God is doing.

Perhaps what we most need to let go of right now in these COVID times is a pernicious individualism that is keeping our vision narrow and leading us into hopelessness. A pernicious individualism that promotes an immature freedom that denies our interconnectedness with each other and creation. We see it in the arrogance and ignorance of climate inaction and incrementalism that either we can divorce our economy and well-being from the health of the planet or we can set goals and agendas that ignore what the planet is telling us. As if the ice sheets, storms and temperatures are open for negotiation. We see this pernicious individualism in the anti-mask movement that seems to care not for vulnerable people. We see it among politicians who see poverty and racism as individual issues not systemic ones, providing cover for inaction in protecting racialized and poor people from the virus. This, even when the failure of an individualistic approach results in lockdowns that hurt everyone

Yet, how much worse the pandemic would be without socialized medicine. We only have to look south to see this. We can in large part thank those who learned from the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. Prior to 1918, it was recognized that poor people in sub-standard living conditions got sicker than the well off and thus were spreaders of disease. But, eugenics was then a mainstream view, and privileged elites looked down on workers and the poor as inferior categories of human being, who lacked the drive to achieve a better standard of living. If they sickened and died from typhus, cholera and other crowd diseases, the reasons were inherent to them. As a result, not much thought was given to caring for “undeserving” people. But this resulted in poor people not seeing doctors, not reporting symptoms and the disease spread into every corner of society. It became clear that it was no longer reasonable to blame individuals for catching an infectious disease and to deny them care based on these judgements. The 1920’s thus saw the beginning of national health insurance schemes.³ In letting go of established ways of thinking and judgements that were keeping societies stuck in self-defeating modes of operating something new and hopeful emerged that has likely saved thousands of lives in today’s pandemic.

Most of the time, hope is found in getting out of our own way and simply noticing where life is emerging, where God is moving and leading. In the words of theologian and scholar Kelly Brown-Douglas, God is always coming toward us, we’re simply called to move toward God. There we will find hope. That almost always means letting go of something that is preventing us from seeing where life is emerging, where God is calling. Advent hope is confidence that the One who has been with us in the past does not abandon us in the messiness of human life. Advent hope expands our horizons from our own limited possibilities to the expansiveness of what God is doing and where God is calling. What appears to the world to be ridiculous wishful thinking is simply the quiet confidence of an expectation rooted in the experience of grace. Our advent journey begins. Thanks be to God.

³ Laura Spinney, *The World Changed Its Approach to Health After the 1918 Flu. Will It After The COVID-19 Outbreak?* <https://time.com/5797629/health-1918-flu-epidemic/>, March 7, 2020.

