

“Choosing Hope”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 33:1-16

December 1, 2019 - First Sunday of Advent

We begin our new Church Year in the same place we ended last week, with the words of Jeremiah, “the weeping prophet.” As a prophet of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Jeremiah has seen the Northern Kingdom of Israel conquered and has been sounding the alarm that the same fate awaits Judah.

We are in chapter 33, and by this point the Babylonians have been sacking Jerusalem for a year. Some of the folks have already been taken into exile. The siege will continue for another year after this. Things are really bad. And since he had been going on and on about how the kingdom had been so naughty and so things were going to get bad, and nobody likes a know-it-all, Jeremiah is being held prisoner in the king’s palace through the battle.

Everything looks pretty bleak and we’re not even at rock-bottom yet for Judah. Into that moment comes the word of God to the prophet. Listen to the promise of hope in the thirty-third chapter of the book of the prophet Jeremiah:

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was still confined in the court of the guard: Thus says the LORD who made the earth, the LORD who formed it to establish it—the LORD is God’s name: Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the houses of this city and the houses of the kings of Judah that were torn down to make a defense against the siege-ramps and before the sword: The Chaldeans are coming in to fight and to fill them with the dead bodies of those whom I shall strike down in my anger and my wrath, for I have hidden my face from this city because of all their wickedness. I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them; they shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.

Thus says the LORD: In this place of which you say, “It is a waste without human beings or animals,” in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD: “Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good, for God’s steadfast love endures forever!” For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In this place that is waste, without human beings or animals, and in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks. In the towns of the hill country, of the Shephelah, and of the Negeb, in the land of Benjamin, the places around Jerusalem, and in the towns of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the LORD.

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. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to make grain offerings, and to make sacrifices for all time.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

My great-grandmother, my *abeulita* who I called "Lita," met the love of her life when she was a teenage girl in Puerto Rico named Venancia Sierra. The young man who would become her husband — my great-grandfather — told her that she was his "esperanza," his hope. He told her this enough times that it became her nickname. Eventually, she started signing papers "Esperanza." As they made a life together in Puerto Rico and then New York City, as they raised eight children, as they lived through the Great Depression and poverty and World War II and a whole lot of family mayhem, she remained Esperanza - Hope. When Lita died, the day before my thirteenth birthday - and some two decades after her husband had died - her legal name was Esperanza Concepción. She chose "Hope." Hope Conception. A perfect name for Advent.

Spanish is like a lot of other languages in that the verb "to hope" - *esperar* - also means "to wait." I think that hoping comes easy to us when we are young and then we usually learn to stop doing such a frivolous thing.

Waiting, on the other hand, is definitely not in our nature.

I often worry that I live in too much of a bubble of relative like-mindedness, never more than when the topic of the timing of Christmas decor appearing in stores arises. We all seem to be in agreement. So, either the people who are delighted to see reindeer before Halloween all live in Mississippi, or somebody around here is fibbing and is furtively festooning their fireplace with candy canes during that hour we get back when Daylight Saving Time ends. Babies don't like to wait. Children don't like to wait. Adults don't like to wait. You millennials and you boomers can agree: waiting is hard.

And here we are, part of a tradition that chooses to wait, even as Band Aid and Mariah Carey and Bing Crosby have been at it for weeks on the radio. We light one new candle each week and grapple with strange prophets and sing these hymns of longing.

Perhaps we believe that the weird prophetic poems and the dim-but-growing light set just the right kind of mood for our kind of God? Is it possible that these songs that ache for justice and restoration, the tunes that are full of lament and heavy with sighing, the music that ploddingly thumps along with hearts forced to wait is what catches God's holy ear?

I wonder if God is less interested in our praise than in hearing that we yearn for something new, that we are hungry, that we notice that things aren't the way we've been told God intends them to be. In that dissatisfaction we can choose cynicism or we can choose hope. We can throw our hands up, or we can put our hands together, and put our hands to work, and put our hands in the hands of someone who needs lifting up.

Waiting and yearning and longing, that's where hope has at least the chance of breaking in. Joy is wonderful, and we'll get there, but joy can be hard-won or it can be easy and it's not always apparent which is which. Joy can emerge from hope, or it can be store-bought, or faked in an attempt to fool everyone. I have several friends whose joking response to the blatant and shameless corruption, the unvarnished racism and nationalism, and the callous disregard for human lives in peril that they read about in the news is to adopt a plastic smile and proclaim: "Everything is fine! Everything is fine! This is normal!"

Genuine joy is, of course, more complicated and what we all hope to taste as the angels sing in a few weeks. But unexamined joy need not be hungry for hope. It's not doubting or asking questions. Joy is known fully after the long night, when the siege is relentless, when waiting leads the mind and heart to wander and investigate hope as an option.

The city is literally crumbling. Houses are being dismantled to create barricades. Families are missing. What Jeremiah said would happen is happening. And now, just now, before the city has even fallen, the word of God comes to the imprisoned prophet.

Edgar Allen Poe wrote a poem called "The Bells" that might be worth a read this Advent. In it he describes how different bells make different sounds. Sleigh bells are silver and tinkle and jingle. Wedding bells are golden as they ring and chime. Alarm bells are brazen as they clamor and clangor. Funeral bells are iron as they toll and knell and moan and groan.

Jeremiah is in a clamor, clangor, toll and knell, moan and groan situation here. The sound of those bells of destruction will last for an exiled generation under the Babylonians and echo through the history of the Jewish people as they keep hearing clamor and toll and yet, somehow, they continue to hear the word of God.

Into the deafening clanging soundscape comes that word and God speaks of perhaps the least obvious things imaginable right now: songs of joy and nations looking on in awe and golden wedding bells ringing and chiming and shepherds getting to shepherd and priests getting to do priestly things. And this promise of restoration comes with a reference to the Branch that will spring up — Jeremiah talked about this last week! — and it intertwines with what Isaiah said about the shoot from the stump and God's prophets seem to be on the same page about something bigger happening here.

We are waiting for, perhaps, the least obvious thing. In the midst of our own struggles — the cynicism-
invitation that is life in 2019, the complete unfairness of disease, the losses that compound — and the
struggles of our neighbors that we choose to let into our hearts, we await the birth of a tiny Jewish baby in
a hayseed town in the Who Cares region of the Roman Empire more than two-thousand years ago.

It is not obvious that this child will have anything for us.

It is not obvious that there is hope to be found in him.

It is not obvious that we should put our trust in baby Yeshua, son of Mary and Joe, cute as he may be.

And here we are, choosing to wait:

for new life;

for a challenge to the picture we see;

for justice and righteousness, embodied and enacted;

for grace poured out;

for hope.

We have heard a Word, a ringing, a song of yearning.

It feels foreign and beautiful and cuts through the noise and it might just be irresistible.

It is for us, and it will not be easy to sing along at all times, but it seems to be leading us somewhere.

Listen for the bells and allow hope to interpret their tones for you.

And do not fear, for there is good news of great joy ahead.

Amen.