

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT | NOVEMBER 28, 2021

JEREMIAH 33:14-16 | PSALM 25:1-10 | 1 THESSALONIANS 3:9-13 |
LUKE 21:25-36

About five years ago, Philippe Pelletier was contracted to set up a Christmas tree in downtown Montreal. Pelletier promised that Montreal would have a great Christmas tree, even taller than the one in Rockefeller Center. And that's exactly what Pelletier delivered. But what this tree possessed in height, it lacked in virtually every other attribute. Think *Charlie Brown's Christmas* and you get the idea. The New York *Times* described it as "ungainly" and "unloved," while Canada's more polite CTV asked if maybe Quebecers could learn to love it. Pelletier seemed befuddled by the whole ordeal. After all, he'd delivered exactly what he promised.

It's fitting that as we begin this season of trees, the taller the better, our readings are focused on the stump of a tree. Tall trees might be signs of majesty and beauty and longevity. (Look no further than the cedars of Lebanon.) But the stump is infinitely more interesting. Anyone can see the beauty in a tree that touches the sky. But a special kind of person to find beauty in a stump. It takes a kind of person like Jeremiah.

You probably noticed that the reading we heard from Jeremiah today doesn't really sound like Jeremiah at all. And that's because there's a turn that happens partway through the book. For most of the book, Jeremiah has been relentlessly condemning the Israelites' for exploiting the poor and profiting from the marginalized. While profits have been soaring and the buildings reaching toward the heavens, Jeremiah has been warning about the coming ruin. When the Israelites think things are going well, the prophetic word is one of judgement.

But now that ruin is coming closer. And with the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar quickly advancing on the city, with the destruction of their homes and deportation of their families all but inevitable, the prophet turns. Away from a word of judgement to a word of hope.

Hope is nice. We love hope. Who doesn't? The nice thing about hope is that you can make it whatever you want. Like that old Shepherd Fairy poster with "HOPE" embossed in big bold letters, hope serves mostly as a conduit for our own desires. It's whatever you want it to be. Probably for things to be better or perfect or, to use a word that's lost all its meaning, "normal." Look around this holiday season, and you'll see the word "hope" plastered just about everywhere.

But Jeremiah's hope is different. For one, Jeremiah's hope begins with honesty. So often our practice of hope is just a desire to look away from certain parts of the world, other people, and ourselves. We can be hopeful as long as we don't have to think too hard. But Jeremiah's hope actually talks about the world the way it is. Jeremiah doesn't say, *Well, maybe the Babylonians will decide not to sack us after all. Or Maybe*

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we won't get deported if we all smile and wave politely when they show up. No, Jeremiah acknowledges the situation. We're going to get run over and sent into exile. If you've read Gerry Lauro's columns on the prophets, you know that the prophetic word begins with "reality." Which is the same thing as honesty. We can't have hope for creation if we don't understand and acknowledge what's happening.

There's a famous scene in Jeremiah right before the Babylonians attack where Jeremiah buys a field. On the surface, this is a completely illogical act. But Jeremiah does it not because he thinks the Babylonians won't show up, but because he thinks the Israelites will come out of exile someday. For Jeremiah, hope isn't a denial of reality but a confrontation with it.

Second, this hope comes from trust in God. So often when we talk about hope, we're not exactly sure exactly why we're supposed to be hopeful. When Starbucks prints "Hope" on the side of a cup, there's no there there. It's not wrong. It's just sort of meaninglessness. Hope has become, for many of us, another synonym for optimism. Things will get better because they do. The arc of the universe bends toward justice by itself. Just sit back and wait it out.

But Jeremiah calls people to hope in God. This probably sounds obvious. *The prophet tells people to trust God. No kidding.* But you have to remember that these people think they've just lost their covenant with God. Trusting in God isn't obvious at all. Even though God could justifiably abandon the people, Jeremiah says, God won't. No, God will raise up a branch from the stump of their community. And that Branch is Christ, the tree of life.

And third, Jeremiah's hope isn't just a way of spiritualizing our desires or a kind of catch-all term for stuff we like. Jeremiah hopes *for* something. In particular, he hopes for God's "justice and righteousness." "Justice and righteousness" has a particular meaning beyond just two nice things. *Mispat s'daqa* is similar to what we would call "social justice."¹ That people are treated the way they deserve not according to the market or the king or the class structure but according to the love of God. The hope of Jeremiah isn't just a going back to the way things were before the Babylonians showed up. It's a hope for a better future based not on our own whims but on the steadfast love of God.

That's what hope is about. Honesty. God. Justice. We are honest about our past and our histories. We trust that God is acting in, for, and among us now. And we look to the future liberation of all God's people. Hope is about all three.

That's why Advent is a season when we focus on hope. Because Christ is the fullness of all our hopes. He holds it all together in his life. In Jesus, God deals with our histories and legacies. Jesus doesn't come into a world in theory. He comes into a particular point in time, a particular social structure, a particular political structure. He

¹ Walter Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament* (A&C Black, 2008), 60–61.

looks at the world as it really is, even if it leads him to weeping. In Jesus, God acts for us. God forgives us. God heals us. God teaches us. God frees us from what binds us. And God raises us from death. And in Jesus, God creates a new way of being. A community that is normed not by greed, resentment, and exceptionalism, but by justice and righteousness.

There's at least one more thing we need to say about hope. Which is that hope is a practice. So often when we talk about hope, we talk about it as a reaction to the world around us or as a disposition that some people carry and some don't. The vision of hope that Jeremiah gives us a little different.

When we try to understand the world around us more coherently, that is an act of hope. When we try to listen to and create space for God, that is an act of hope. (Which means welcoming silence can be act of hope.) And when we imagine different ways of being, of bringing God's justice and righteousness into our communities, even if we don't have all the answers, we are engaging in a practice of hope.

That practice isn't flashy or attention-grabbing. It doesn't win Nobel Prizes. It doesn't get on the front page of the papers. It doesn't look terribly important. But Jeremiah tells us, that's part of the point. If you want to find a reason for hope, look not at the majestic or awe-inspiring, but at the stumps, the places where life seems cut off. And it's there that we find Christ among us.

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