

December 3rd: Promise

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” In these narratives, we’ve been taking a closer look at the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

Our main focus today is on the beautiful music of our symphony guests, but I do want to offer just a few quick thoughts on our first Advent passage from the prophet Jeremiah. Before I begin, I invite you to pray with me.

Faithful God, we hear your repeated promises through our sacred story, and we trust that you will always remember the commitments that you have made with our spiritual ancestors. We listen for your voice now, so that we might hear your promises anew and trust in you to continue the work that you have started. Prepare our hearts and minds for the ways in which you are still speaking, still restoring, still healing, and still loving us as your children. Amen.

Our Advent texts this year take us a profound journey through the writings of our Old Testament prophets—and this is because the story of Jesus really begins centuries prior, with the need for a Messiah rooted in this story of invasion, destruction and exile. God’s people need a Savior, because they have been indelibly marked by this experience of being conquered and taken out of their homeland. This desire for a powerful divine King cannot be disconnected from this narrative of violence and diaspora.

We begin our series in Jeremiah, a prophet of the southern kingdom of Judah, and a powerful voice that seeks to both comfort and challenge God’s people during a time of great disorientation and great distress.

At the beginning of Jeremiah's writings, we learn that the nation of Judah had watched as its northern neighbor Israel was devastated by the armies of Assyria—and these two southern tribes had witnessed their ten northern siblings were carried off into captivity never to return. Now, in the early 6th century BCE, they face their own existential crisis: the mighty Babylonian army is on their doorstep, and their own invasion is at hand. In the prior chapters of Jeremiah's story, we hear that the villages around the capital city have been destroyed, the vineyards and olive groves razed to the ground, and countless lives have been lost already. Families are displaced, loved ones are killed, starvation is a very real threat for thousands of people. And so, when we come to our passage for today, I want us to understand that we are reading about a people at the very depths of despair. It is at this moment that the residents of Jerusalem understand that they are under siege, and under foreign occupation with no end in sight.

During this siege, Jeremiah finds himself in a part of the royal palace called the courtyard of the guard. King Zedekiah has imprisoned him there because of Jeremiah's prophecies of doom and peril, but while he is imprisoned, Jeremiah once again receives a word from the Lord that he is compelled to share. Jeremiah has prophesied that the land of Judah will be conquered by the Babylonians, but he also has something to say about the restoration of God's people—he has a promise for what is going to happen to God's people after their period of captivity.

In verses 6 and 7, Jeremiah shares this word from God: “Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before.”

This promise continues in verse 10, when Jeremiah speaks of a future Jerusalem saying, “Yet in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted, inhabited by neither people nor animals, there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and

the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD, saying, “Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good; his love endures forever.” For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were before,’ says the LORD.”

God goes on to promise that the land around Jerusalem will once again be pasture land for animals, that new grass and fields will grow, and these flocks will be watched over by shepherds—and this is a promise that the current destruction and current barrenness will eventually be turned into new life and nourishment for God’s people.

You might think that Jeremiah’s prophecy might be welcome news for God’s people at this time, but like with his prophecies about capture and exile, his words are mostly rejected by the leadership and the residents of Judah. And I think there’s a reason for that. In the midst of a brutal siege, we might be able to understand that this kind of promise seems impossible. It seems impossible to imagine peace in the middle of war. It seems impossible to imagine lush fields while looking at rubble. It seems impossible to imagine health and healing when your family and friends have been killed.

Why would God promise these things for the future when God’s people need help in the present moment? Why would God promise restoration when the people really want protection today? I think those are valid questions, and valid emotions for anyone who is facing immense challenges or a dark night of the soul. I wish I had a better answer for why God’s timetable often seems so different from our own, or why God’s plans don’t always align with our preferences, I really do.

So if you’re listening to God’s promises from the mouth of Jeremiah and feeling a little disillusioned because of everything that is currently going on in our world, I get it. I totally understand why people are not big on promises these days. Talk is cheap. As we’ve seen in our political environment and various campaigns, promises are easy to make, but can be very difficult to keep, and it makes sense that people are prioritizing actions over empty words.

But if there's still a tiny part of you that is desperately needing some kind of hope, or something to hold onto while you deal with whatever circumstances that you're facing, I believe that Jeremiah's words do have some power that we can trust. In a previous meditation, we discussed how God is not like human beings, God is not like us with our limited compassion and conditional love for each other. God's character is totally different from ours, and God's love for creation is truly everlasting.

And so, even though our problems persist, and even though some of God's beloved children are still under siege, and even though we can look around and see so much destruction—I hold out hope that God's promises can be trusted, even if we don't trust the promises of our fellow humans. I hold out hope that God's promises will actually come true, and God does intend to make all things right. I hold out hope that God is at work, even if we can't see it or understand it right now. I hold out hope that God's love for each and every one of us means that we won't be left in our suffering or in our brokenness forever.

If you've been with us in previous Sundays, you might remember that each week, we choose a verb from our passage to guide us into a new week. And predictably, our verb for this week is: promise. And I think this verb has two applications for us as we enter into whatever chaos and busyness is waiting for us outside of this sanctuary and this moment of peace.

First, I challenge each of us to dig deep inside of us for that tiny speck of hope that we might be holding onto, to search our souls for that glimmer of hope that we sometimes suppress because we believe that hope in our current context is foolish. Once you find that piece of you that can imagine a better future, I invite you to remember God's promise to us that a Savior is on the way. I invite you to remember that God's promise of a Messiah did in fact come true, and will always be true, even as we wait for the day that God's kingdom on earth is complete.

And then, I challenge you to make a promise to someone else—a promise that you are going to keep beyond a shadow of a doubt. I challenge you to make a promise that will make someone's day, or relieve a burden, or bring joy in the midst of sorrow. It could be doing the dishes for your tired partner, or delivering a meal to a neighbor, or treating a friend to coffee. It could be helping out a fellow overwhelmed parent, or calling a loved one, or whatever else you feel God leading you to do.

Make at least one good promise, my friends. Your one small promise is just the beginning, but it will help rekindle something that I think we've lost. With your one promise, I invite you to be part of rebuilding our collective hope, our collective trust, our collective faith. I invite you to make a promise that reminds someone else of God's unfailing love, so that bit by bit, we can restore each other's faith in a more whole, more peaceful, more compassionate, more just, more equitable world.

Amen.