

## **November 30th: The Promise of Hope**

My friends, welcome to our Advent series called God With Us: Advent Promises for a Just World. This month we're using a resource developed by the UMC General Commission on Religion & Race, a body that aims to help churches navigate complex questions related to racism, discrimination, and other forms of injustice that are part of our cultural fabric. As we move through the Advent story, and wait with anticipation for the arrival of Jesus, we acknowledge that he is coming to a broken and divided world.

Before I introduce today's topic and dig a little deeper into our scripture text, I invite you to pray with me.

*God of Hope, you are the light of the world. In your light, we can see how fractured and hostile we have become to each other and to the rest of creation. In your light, we see our inability to heal wounded relationships, reconcile social estrangements, and fix unjust systems and institutions. In your light, we see our separation from brothers, sisters, and siblings, we see how far we have drifted from your original plan for wholeness. And in your light, we see hope for our future. We see hope that we cannot build or buy for ourselves. As we meditate on your Word and learn more about what it means to be people of your hope, we ask for your wisdom and patience to guide us. Help us receive your hope with open hearts, so that we might be able to share this hope with others. Amen.*

For my birthday this year, my friend Lauren gave a cute little plant in a gorgeous blue ceramic pot. I've killed pretty much every single plant I've ever received or bought, but I was determined not to let this one die. It's got a spot on my counter, and every couple of days, I check for signs of life and that it hasn't wilted overnight. For a while, I think I was watering it too much, so I slowed down and only watered it when the soil looked particularly dry, and that seems to be working. At first, nothing changed about the plant—or at least nothing that I could see. And then BAM one day, a little sprout appeared! It was just starting to grow on one of the branches, emerging little by little.

This new growth reminded me of a decision my family made when we first moved into our newly built house—I was eight years old at the time and we had moved across town to a different neighborhood. In our old neighborhood, our house had backed up on a forest preserve, part of our town’s game refuge of three thousand acres. From my bedroom window, I could see all of these towering trees, with their branches fanning out over the roofs of neighboring houses, dropping their leaves into our yards. But our new neighbor was on this former farmland—wide open spaces, big grassy lots, not a lot of wilderness.

So we decided to plant a tree in the front yard, but fully grown trees are apparently very expensive, so instead we came home from Home Depot with what looked like a tree branch or a stick, and not even a stick big enough to use for playing fetch with a dog. It was so skinny, about three feet tall, and it looked absolutely ridiculous. It swayed in even the slightest wind, it looked like it would constantly break in half, and I seriously doubted that it would actually become a tree. Against all odds, it did grow, and by the time we sold my childhood home in 2020, it had grown to be a moderately sized...bush. Just kidding, it did become a full tree, but it will probably take several more decades for it to reach its final height and density.

You might be asking, what does this have to do with Advent?

Well, our passage for today contains a similar image—our biblical author talks about “a righteous branch that springs up,” specifically from the line of King David. At first glance, this language may appear confusing, but what our biblical author is trying to communicate is that this prophecy combines a sense of genealogy with a natural metaphor—pairing the family tree of David with this image of a branch that sprouts out of the ground. But instead of talking about a specific kind of plant or tree branch, our text is referring to a person—a Messiah who will save God’s people from their present pain and suffering. Our passage calls this person “righteous,” because they will be the one who leads human beings back into a harmonious and virtuous relationship with their Creator. This branch, this Messiah, will be the one to

make all things right—they will be the leader, prophet, and Savior who will finally put an end to the suffering of God’s people.

But first, why does our biblical author make this promise? Why does he write down this prophecy of a “branch that springs up”? Why is there a need for a Messiah?

Well, this passage comes from the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, a man living in the southern kingdom of Judah during the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. He’s one of our “major prophets,” but some biblical scholars call him “the weeping prophet” because in addition to the biblical book named after him, he’s also believed to be the author of 1 and 2 Kings and the book of Lamentations—both of which help tell the story of God’s people and the challenges that they faced. In this book, he’s speaking and leading at a time when God’s people are threatened by both internal conflicts and external armies. Jeremiah tells his nation that as a result of ongoing unethical and idolatrous behavior within the monarchy and Jewish elite, the nation of Judah will be invaded by the Babylonians, and the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed. Over the course of many years, this all came true, and the citizens of Judah, including Jeremiah, were driven into exile, which lasted for many decades.

It’s important for us to remember that Jeremiah is writing during one of the most difficult experiences in our entire Bible. This destruction of the temple and the exile to Babylon is on par with the Israelite’s slavery in Egypt, and the persecution faced by Christians under the Roman Empire. It’s the worst case scenario, the lowest of the low points, a physical and spiritual trauma that will leave its mark for dozens of generations. This is one of the times when God’s people are most hopeless, most lost, most afraid.

But somehow, Jeremiah is the kind of prophets who looks at all this devastation and sees a glimmer of hope. Somehow, Jeremiah is living under a foreign emperor, but he receives this vision of a future that includes a very different kind of king. Somehow, Jeremiah is surrounded by families separated

from each other, and he's able to imagine a reality where all of God's children are brought back together. He isn't able to give a specific date and time, but in his prophecy, God says, "the days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." And when this Messiah does arrive, Jeremiah writes, "he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety."

This is what God and Jeremiah knew that God's people most needed to hear. This is the reassurance that their souls longed for. This is the good news that they needed, in order to survive their current circumstances. They desperately wanted to be back in their homeland, living at peace with their neighbors and friends. They would have done anything to be reunited with their familiar places and spaces. Unfortunately, this Messiah doesn't come during the exile. He doesn't appear when the temple is being rebuilt. He doesn't make his presence known when more rulers and leaders once again take over the priesthood and the throne. In fact, more than 500 years pass between Jeremiah's prophecy, and the events of our New Testament. That's five centuries of waiting, five centuries of longing. And then, most of us know that the promised Messiah does come—but he's not a warrior on a horse leading an army, or a guy wearing a fancy robe and crown. In some ways, he doesn't look at all like Jeremiah had predicted.

The story that we tell on Christmas Eve, the narrative that we will read in just a few short weeks, tells us that the Messiah comes as a little baby, born to an unwed, teenage mother. This is the King who will restore everything to the way it's supposed to be, but he's in a manger, because there was no room for his little family in the inn. Looking at the infant Jesus, it would make sense if God's people saw him the same way that I originally saw the ridiculous tree that my family planted in our front yard. Sure, it may be a branch, but it's nothing like what we all pictured. Just like my skinny stem blowing in the breeze, Jesus wasn't yet big, or tall, or strong. He was fragile and vulnerable, in need of protection and care.

And so it might be tempting for us to see God's promises as foolish, or to be hesitant to trust that they will come true.

During Advent, we once again remember how frustrating it can be to live in a world that is still broken and hurting—we once again lament like Jeremiah that injustice and corruption and unethical behavior plague our communities. When we gather to worship, or when we pray at home, or when we serve our neighbors, we acknowledge that we have not yet fully arrived at the vision that our prophets and sacred text have promised us. We acknowledge that there is still so much work to do to get us to that place. We still need our Messiah to return to us and make things right.

Here's just a few laments that came to mind for me this week:

This Advent, racism is still very much a reality for our black and brown siblings—they endure evils like mass incarceration, police brutality, and blatant discrimination.

This Advent, our immigrant neighbors are facing new threats of unlawful deportations and dangerous profiling at the hands of ICE. They worry day and night that they will be separated from family or sent away to an inhumane detention center.

This Advent, those who are financially struggling are wondering how they will eat if SNAP benefits continue to be cut or withheld.

This Advent, our rampant and wasteful consumerism continues to erode our planet and deplete our natural resources.

This Advent, our nation's leaders have demonstrated that they would rather spend money on wars and bombs than on strengthening communities and safety nets.

This Advent, our queer friends and family are in need of assurance that we are willing to fight for their rights and dignity, because their relationships and bodies are in danger.

This Advent, families in Gaza are living in wreckage, unsure if they will ever be able to rebuild or be reunited.

This Advent, millions of Americans are homeless or without stable housing, leaving them vulnerable to the freezing temperatures and inhospitable conditions.

I could go on, and I'm sure there's many more laments that are on your heart too. I'm sure you can name dozens if not hundreds of ways that you think the world should be different.

I know many of us are looking around our nation right now and consider our current division and devastation to be one of the worst moments in our history—it feels like each week we hit a new rock bottom. We might not physically be in exile, like our ancestors in the Old Testament, but we feel so far away from the homeland that many of us remember or are longing for. That's our reality right now, and still, Jeremiah shows us a more faithful way to respond.

Like Jeremiah, it is our job to call out the injustices and inequalities in our communities, we can be a prophetic voice for our time. Not just me, in our pulpit, or our staff team in our programming—but you too. You are God's people, the Church! You have voices to raise, you have experiences to share, you have wisdom that our world needs to hear! It is our job to be honest about these fractures and collective sins—because we can't fix what we can't name. We can only start to see and imagine solutions when we are willing to hold it all up to the light. So this week I invite you to meditate on how you are going to call out injustice when you see it or experience it. How will you advocate for the marginalized and vulnerable? What is one tangible action that you can take to help root out intolerance? What prophetic truth does our world need to hear?

And like Jeremiah, it is also our job to search for hope, even when and where we might least expect it. When we are in the depths of despair, in a situation that feels totally hopeless, we should be on the lookout, because that's when God comes to us with these words of hope. The people of Jeremiah's day never lived to see the miracles and resurrection of Jesus, and we might not be alive to

see the full realization of a better and more whole world, but that doesn't mean we don't have an important role to play. Like Jeremiah and his fellow exiles, we have been entrusted with good news, we are the carriers of this sacred hope. In this generation, we hold onto it like a precious jewel, and when the time comes to pass it down to our children and grandchildren, we can teach them what it means to be people of hope. To the world, hope might seem foolish, but we have been entrusted with a message that has been protected for thousands of years. Advent is the perfect time to be like Jeremiah, with eyes to see the hope that God has given us—the hope that will continue for centuries still.

So this week, I encourage you to seek out hope, in whatever form that looks like for you. Hope might look like watching a plant in your garden sprout its first bud, or like watching a skinny tree grow and blossom over many seasons. Hope could appear as a friend who shows up with just the right words of support at the right time, or as a family member who loves you well when you are lost and afraid. Hope could look like real change in our laws and nation, or it could look like a community where you feel safe and welcome.

Ask yourself, where is hope growing in your life? Where are you finding glimpses of God's hope in the darkness?

So my friends, Jeremiah's ancient promise of hope is now in your hands. It is yours this Advent to wonder about, reflect on, and hold onto when life gets tough. Over these next four weeks, it is yours to notice, nurture, and pass down to friends, family, or the next generation who needs to hear it.

As we wait for Jesus together, let us wait in hope.  
Amen.

