

The Righteous King

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner

First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

November 20, 2016

Christ the King (Year C)

Jeremiah 23:1-6



On the first Sunday of Advent, on November 29, 2015, we heard read in this sanctuary a text from Jeremiah 33:14-16 – “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise...In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David...and this is the name by which it will be called, ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”

Do you remember that day? By the gathering light of one candle on the Advent wreath, we said the words, “The days are surely coming...” Those words have echoed through this year.

And here today, on the last Sunday of the Christian year, we hear from earlier in Jeremiah, but the same words, “The days are surely coming...”

These words of longing and hope bracket the year through which we have lived. And the fact that they show up twice in Jeremiah hints at their importance. In both instances, these words are a reflection on the core identity of the people.

It starts with the name of that righteous Branch – “the LORD is our Righteousness.” That Hebrew word is Zedekiah, which also happens to be the name of the king of Judah at the time Jeremiah is writing. His coronation as King of Judah was a sick irony. He was placed on the throne as a puppet ruler by Nebuchadnezzar after his first conquest of Jerusalem in 597 BCE. Perhaps the people hoped that this king, after all the failed others, would actually live into the promise of his name. Would the oppressed poor be cared for instead of tread underfoot? Would orphans and widows, those most powerless and vulnerable of the society, finally be secure in the land? Would the culture of violence and condoning of bloodshed finally give way to the blessed kingdom of peace?

It was not to be. In spite of Jeremiah’s pleading, in the ultimate illusion of power, Zedekiah rebelled against his Babylonian overlords. As a result, Jerusalem was

recaptured and destroyed in 586 BCE and a bereaved and maimed Zedekiah was taken in tatters to Babylon.

The names may change, but it is an old story that continues to be told today. We are all of us called to be embodiments of God's righteousness, called to be Zedekiahs, called to embrace the grace of God, to rely on God alone as our king. Yet time and again, like Israel, we clamor for other kings and go chasing after other loyalties. It is an old, old story about how we have traded in our identities for illusions. Zedekiah, then and now, seems to mark the end.

And it is an end, of sorts. It is the end of the illusion. Once we have gone to the limits of our own power, once we are face down in the arena (as Brene Brown puts it), once, having run from the grace of God as far as we can, we are in exile, bereaved, maimed, and in tatters, we are able to hear the words, "The days are surely coming..."

Once the illusion of self-sufficiency has died, the reality of God's grace can be seen clearly, and we learn, once again, that it is God who secures, it is God who brings justice and peace, it is God, and only God, who not only names us, but empowers us to live out our names.

It is this grace-filled word that has bracketed our year. When we stand at the font, water glistening off the head of the baptized, we say these words, "For you Jesus Christ came into the world: for you he lived and showed God's love; for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last, 'It is finished'; for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life; for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand. All this he did for you, before you knew anything of it. And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled: 'We love because God first loved us.'"

We love only because God first loved us. We take our next breath by grace. We work by grace. All that we have and are is gift. We are stewards of this grace in all its manifestations. The words that bracket this year through which we have lived are calls to see everything through the lens of "The days are surely coming...when *God*."

On the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2015, we stood out in the Courtyard, a cold wind blowing, and set the mortgage note on fire. Friends, that was nothing but grace, the grace that makes all things possible because it comes not from us, but from God. You could almost hear the words, beneath the crackling flames: "The days are surely coming..."

And with that mortgage gone, and the mission budget doubled, the year saw those words of promise echoing near and far. The shores of Lesbos, Greece, where babies being held aloft in the cold waters in the Aegean Sea were gathered in by the hands of our members – *the days are surely coming*. Wilson Hall, where eighty of our folks gathered to sack potatoes which that very evening were on the tables of some of the most vulnerable of our community – *the days are surely coming*. Brightstone, OneGenAway, Project J.O.Y., Martha O’Bryan Center, Habitat for Humanity, Hard Bargain Association, Room in the Inn, making new friends and renewing old friendships in this community, with over 170 of our members of all ages engaged in hands-on mission – *the days are surely coming*. Working side-by-side with new friends from the Jewish and Muslim faith communities – *the days are surely coming*.

The year that this promise embraces saw us leave this space for a period of time while the sanctuary got a facelift, and the beauty of it when we returned was only magnified by the knowledge that beneath our feet on the concrete foundation are all those names, dates, words of hope and promise. I only wish I had thought to write, “*The days are surely coming*.”

We have welcomed new members in the twelve months since we heard those words, members who have thrown themselves into responding to God’s grace, quickly becoming an integral part of this community and blessing us all, joining in the communal hope, “*The days are surely coming*.”

As one community we have sung and prayed to the sound of the organ, bagpipes, brass, piano, and these beautiful voices; we have made new friends with the students who sing in our choir and have been a gift to this worshipping community. In each service, the promise that gathers us is powerfully present: “*The days are surely coming*.”

Sunday school classes, Growth Groups, multigenerational gatherings where all ages learn together that all are valuable, all are worthy, all have gifts to offer the Body of Christ; times when we eat together, laugh together, weep together, all of it part of this great gathering God promises through the prophet with those words, “*The days are surely coming*.”

The words that have framed our year, the ones that lie behind, “With God all things are possible,” the ones that fill the air at the font when the baptized are given their true identity, the ones that accompany the grieving as we bear witness to the resurrection, the ones echoing off the walls of every class, every meal, every group in every home, are these, “*The days are surely coming...*”

We come into this world by grace. We live – each breath – by grace. We leave this world held by nothing more than grace. And our lives – top to bottom – are lived to their fullest, are lived as God intended, when we live in gratitude.

Thursday is the day we set aside as a nation to give thanks. I want to say here how grateful I am to serve among you. I am humbled by the chance to each day join in what God is doing in this place, and to do alongside such faithful followers of Jesus Christ as you. I am daily amazed by the gifts of the staff of this congregation, each one sharing those gifts not as a job, but as a calling. I am grateful for the leadership of this church, the session and committees and countless teams of people who as a response to God's grace give of themselves – time, talent, treasure – in ways that transform lives.

Gratitude is a posture. It is really the only possible way to stand before God and live in authentic community with one another.

The other day I was sitting at a table in Wilson Hall when someone came and sat on the other side of me. She wasn't eating, and she had this look on her face, like she really wanted to say something. She made eye contact and began sharing words of thanksgiving. She had clearly thought through what she wanted to say, and as she spoke, it was as if a table was being spread before us as abundant as the one before us this morning. It was a sacred moment, the kind that makes you remember why we are here, not just here in this church, but why we are here in the world, our purpose. It is all gratitude.

I want to invite you this Thanksgiving to join with me in practicing gratitude and generosity. Think of three people who have made an impact on your life, and if possible, give them a call, or better yet, sit down with them, and tell them. Think it through. Speak from your heart. Make yourself vulnerable. See if you don't see the day dawn about which Jeremiah spoke, right then and there. Each time we practice gratitude, that day breaks, and its light can change the world. Amen.