



*A Patch of Hope*

November 28, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Fifth Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord; take our minds and think through them; take mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

We continue our observance of expanded, seven-week Advent—the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday, to be exact. The earliest Advent seasons, starting in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, were seven weeks long; so, we are recovering something old. But we are living into it, in a new social and cultural context, one in which we need to gird our loins for continued uncertainty around the virus, the economy, politics, and so forth, and as the days get shorter....

And you may be able to tell from the texts we heard today that we've really shifted into overdrive. There is a new immediacy and urgency in the voices we hear from Scripture: fear and anxiety, as well as anticipation and longing.

We begin with a short passage from the Prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is primarily known for his anguished criticisms of the society around him. The word “Jeremiad” you probably know, is shorthand for a long list of woes and sins. But less known about Jeremiah is his deep hope for renewal and the imminent activity of God, even, and especially, amid very difficult circumstances. For Jeremiah, that future is better and brighter, more just and more whole, provided we do our part to get our acts together.

Jeremiah was a prophet in Judah, the southern part of what we now know as Israel/Palestine, working from the early 600s into the late 500s before Christ. His vivid depiction both of desolation and hope makes him a perfect guide for Advent. His collected words, called “oracles,” were not put together until sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonians in the year 587 before Jesus.

Of the 52 chapters in the Book of Jeremiah, 48 are vivid descriptions of the people's sins and the coming punishment. This is Jeremiah's rant, we might say. In exquisite detail, Jeremiah correctly predicted that Judah and the dynasty of David would be crushed by its enemies. Furthermore, this defeat was punishment for breaking the covenant with Yahweh by engaging in pagan idolatry, sexual immorality, and exploitation of the poor.

Very much against his own will, Jeremiah proclaimed that the Babylonians were God's chosen instruments for disciplining the people. For his trouble, Jeremiah was, among other things, thrown into a cistern, put into stocks, imprisoned by the king, had scrolls of his oracles burned, and exiled to Egypt, where he died, but not before seeing the Babylonians lay siege to Jerusalem. One tradition has it that he was stoned to death by his fellow refugees, who could no longer stand his sayings of doom and gloom.



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But right in the heart of the rant, in chapters 30 to 33, there is a patch of hope. Scholars have called these chapters the Book of Consolation. We have an excerpt from the Book of Consolation this morning. Remarkably, Jeremiah delivers these words from the jail of Zedekiah, the King of Judah. Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonians. Yet even from the depths of prison, amid a siege, Jeremiah can say on behalf of God:

“Surely the days are coming, when I will fulfill the promise, I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at those times 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 Jeremiah’s words are more than mere talk. While in prison, amazingly, Jeremiah buys a piece of land, seemingly worthless because of the Babylonian threat. Even amidst the wreckage, which he sees with ruthless clarity, Jeremiah stakes a claim, confident in the trustworthiness of God’s promise for the future. As it turns out, 70 years later, the Temple and Jerusalem were rebuilt, and the exiles returned from Babylon and Egypt.

One can see why Jeremiah made it into the Hebrew Bible. Words of truth, and words of hope.

Since the first century, many Christians have seen in Jesus the fulfillment of this promise uttered by Jeremiah. Jesus is the righteous branch to which Jeremiah unknowingly refers. One might argue that our own day is also a time of waiting in the wreckage. Like Jeremiah, we could each rant about what is wrong in the world. Like Jeremiah, we can also speculate about how those wrongs came to be. Economic inequality grows. The virus continues to mutate. Hateful political rhetoric continues. The extent of the opioid crisis becomes clearer. Deadly prejudices continue to be uncovered. The climate lurches toward disaster.

While we may be clear about what we are longing and hoping for—a sense of purpose; healing from a broken relationship or the death of a loved one, restoration to health, a just social order, a civil political life, or something else—the future remains unclear and unsettled. How did Jeremiah cling to hope? How can we cling to hope?

In the Gospel today, Jesus sets forth a scene somewhat akin to Jeremiah’s—a scene of chaos and disorder, of social distress and natural disaster. People are faint with fear and foreboding. Amidst all of this, Jesus exhorts his followers to “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.” Jesus can say this to us because he reminds us that “While heaven and earth pass away, my words will not pass away.”

What are some of those words, Jesus words, that we encounter in Scripture?



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“Come unto me all you are weary, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11.28-30) “This is my body, given for you.” (Luke 22.19) “Fear not, it is I.” (John 6.20) “Behold I am with you, even unto the end of the age.” (Matthew 28.20)

These words encourage us to action. So that our lives may be a book of compassion and consolation. So that our lives may not merely be rants, but also patches of hope. With these words of hope, each of us puts a stake into a patch of spiritual ground, like Jeremiah. However small, however much surrounded by uncertainty, we begin again to live the life that Christ calls us to live, joining in God’s compassionate work in the world, as we wait to greet Jesus again.

**Amen.**