

Hope

Hope is a four letter word. Unlike the usual connotation associated with four letter words, this one is a positive expression about the human experience. Unlike other words associated with this description hope is used frequently in polite conversation—although the conversations heard around us today more and more contain four letter words more traditionally considered taboo. Hope is a word we often use casually—hope you had a good week; hope your vacation was fun—hope your time with family was wonderful; hope your visit to the doctor gave you good news—hope all is well with you. These are expressions of feelings we use almost daily. Webster's New World dictionary defines this use of the word hope first. According to Webster's the main definition of hope is a feeling that what is wanted is likely to happen; it is desire accompanied by expectation. Hope is the name we give to the first of the candles we light during this season of Advent, but that first definition according to Webster's is not a complete definition of the word nor is it the one that best fits what this candle represents. Instead, we need to go to the later possible meanings listed according to Webster's and incorporate them all: Hope is a reason for hope; a person or thing on which one may base some hope. Advent hope like gathering of all the meanings found in the dictionary is more complex than simple expectation of something positive. As one of the candles surrounding that central candle called the Christ candle, we recognize that Advent hope is one of the things we receive from Christ. Advent hope is far from a casual expression about our feelings regarding the everyday and mundane events of our lives. Advent hope is based on our deeper trust and reliance on the promise we have received from God. The lectionary reading from Jeremiah 33:14-16 is an expression of that hope: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time 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." In these words we understand that God will certainly fulfill all those things promised through the covenant God initiated so long ago when he proclaimed I will be your God and you will be my people. In these words it is easy to see that Jeremiah is voicing a word of hope that he has been given from the Lord, but in the context of Jeremiah's life and experience, it is hard to see how that first definition of hope from Webster's fits. Jeremiah was living in a period of darkness for the people of Israel and Judah. They have been scattered from their homeland. They were living as a conquered people in Babylon. Their way of life has been completely overturned. They have no sense of security and no reason to expect they will live to see their homeland again. They are living in a reality that is very different from that found in the covenant promise. They fear they have been abandoned. These words of Jeremiah are words of encouragement and hope given to them in the midst of catastrophe and despair. Jeremiah had a vision of the future that was based on the truth of God's covenant promise; a vision not under the control of kings and soldiers, implemented by alliances and power and worked out in the security of false ideas about God and God's vision for Israel's future. Jeremiah's hope was rooted in the ongoing activity of God in the world on God's terms, and only on God's terms. In the verses of chapter 32, we read how Jeremiah enacted his trust, his faith, his hope in the future reality which God revealed to him. He acts in such a way as to give a concrete demonstration of his faith, his trust in God's covenant promise and a hope that anticipates the truth of God's covenant promise. The text tells us he is approached by a cousin before the

exile, before the Temple is destroyed, but when Jerusalem was already being besieged. The cousin tells him that land belonging to his uncle at Anathoth is being offered to him if he wishes to claim it. This land is located about three miles outside of Jerusalem and probably already occupied by the besieging army. The uncle, in selling the land is giving up any future possession. He has abandoned hope. Current conditions make it seem unlikely that Jeremiah will ever be able to take possession of the land. But Jeremiah does indeed purchase the land. He has the deed witnessed so his ownership is documented. Then the deed is placed in an earthenware jar so it will be protected for a long time. Jeremiah is realistic. He doesn't expect the Babylonians to be defeated any time soon. Yet he still purchases land which has already been taken by the Babylonian army. Jeremiah's actions—his hopes-- are based on his understanding that despite the immediate situation, God is still present and will provide for the covenant people. In this action, Jeremiah's message to the people in exile was that God would restore their fortunes—not in the sense of power and riches, but in the sense of normalcy. That is, beyond this time of horrible destruction of the Temple and all their way of life, there would be a time when they would again be able to buy fields, to conduct business, to plant crops, to raise children, to worship God. The central theme of the Jeremiah texts is found in chapter 33: 14: "I will fulfill the promise I made." The "promise" stated here should not be understood as simply a historical prediction about the coming of the Messiah—the righteous branch—which can be checked off when it corresponds to a certain event. Rather, this word, this "says the Lord", this promise is nothing less than the faithfulness of God that calls the people to live in trust of that faithfulness, even during the worst of times. The term "Righteous Branch" was the historically concrete form earlier prophets had used to express the promise, to describe the faithfulness of God. In the metaphor as used by the Hebrew prophets, this makes a prediction was seen as a promise to restore the Davidic monarchy, a new beginning which as attested to by Jeremiah's purchase of the field. But the message given by God through Jeremiah was more about God and God's faithfulness to them, sinful though they were, than it was about a specific new earthly king. God's message was about God committing God's self to a people in spite of their disobedience, even in the midst of the exile which was understood as a judgment on sin. It is that faithfulness of God, expressed again and again throughout history, that is the foundation of our hope. It is in our understanding enough about God to know what God has promised. God has promised: "I will be with you." This promise means God will not leave either God's people or the world as it is in the grip of sin. It is that promise and God's faithfulness that allows us again to expect a coming, an Advent, in which the king and Lord of all the earth will establish his reign and restore the fortunes of all people. That is the expectancy—the hope—with which we begin Advent; not only celebrating the fulfillment of the metaphor of the Righteous Branch, but the trust in God's eternal faithfulness to us. This hope is not just hoping, but is a deep expectation, a profound faith that is empowered to envision a new future solely on the basis of God and God's grace. This is the proclaimed promise of God: "Days are surely coming!" This text calls us to believe—to trust—in the words of promise. This text is not just the prediction about a future event—the incarnation-- that for us is now long past. This text proclaims something about the nature of God. This text shows us people should be cautious that we do not too easily promise what kind of future we can expect. God's faithfulness will ensure that the promise is fulfilled—but it will be done in God's own time and way. We are called to live in the present, yet with the expectation that in some concrete way

we cannot yet envision, God will work God's own restoration of all things. "Days are surely coming!", says the Lord. That is a call not only to hope, but to faith in God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.