

## Remaining Hopeful

“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.” These are the words recorded as having been spoken by the Levite priest Jeremiah to the people of the covenant living at the time of the siege of Jerusalem probably just before its fall. After having been given years to speak of judgment to the king and rulers in Jerusalem by God, the reality of the destruction is coming to pass. In the middle of this chaos, Jeremiah is actually in prison for his words of judgment: his message from God. Then in the middle of this on-going disaster he is given a somewhat different message—a message which contains the promise that this destruction and exile will not last forever— that despite the appearance of being abandoned by God, God remains faithful to a people who are not—that God will redeem them—so Jeremiah now has a message of hope to sustain them in the meantime: A message that promises that “in those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” For the people in Jeremiah’s audience the worst has not yet happened, but it is inevitable—yet NOW, in the midst of the disaster, he speaks these words of promise. In chapter 32, because the Lord has told him to do this, Jeremiah has purchased a piece of land, a foolish thing to do when a conquering army is at your city’s gates and everyone else is fleeing the land. But Jeremiah 32:15 records another promise given by the LORD when he told Jeremiah to make the purchase: “For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” So Jeremiah has acted on this hope, this promise he has been given. So although all may appear to be lost, God is still faithful to the covenant promise that there will come a time and place where God’s will and purpose will be done in this world. For what is promised is “a righteous Branch will spring up”; a leader who will “execute justice and righteousness in the land.” As we look around our world today, in many ways it seems our world shares much in common with Jeremiah’s world. It is filled with fear and uncertainty, even despair. Things around us often appear chaotic; we often feel as if we are under siege as anger, prejudice, hatred and violence seem to break out easily. As we begin our Advent journey these scriptures remind us that the world that was broken then is still broken. The covenant ways of the Lord are not widespread as we have many who are marginalized and oppressed, yet the word of the Lord also remains constant and faithful—the prophets did not lie and neither can we—the world is truly broken. But because we know God is faithful we also know these words and all of scripture point us to a future in which the Lord’s own righteousness will reside with the people. God calls for there to be righteousness and justice in the land—that time is not now, but it is coming. The Lord made a promise that will not be forgotten. “The days are surely coming.” This is a vision that is given to us to hold onto, especially when we cannot see or comprehend how God is at work in our messy, brokenness. This is the tone which is set by our “Advent” preparations for the “coming” we anticipate, for we need to hear the warnings to “be alert” for what comes in the context of ultimate and sure promise. During Advent, the body of Christ proclaims an alternative reality that grows out of our confidence in God’s righteousness. Advent preparedness invites us to name the places in our lives and our society that are at odds with the divine vision of justice and righteousness. There may be a wide gap between what is and what we wish were to; yet the promise of Advent is that the Lord is our righteousness. This promise allows us to proclaim that there is an

alternative reality in which all things will be made new. The promise that “justice and righteousness will be executed in the land”; that God’s concern that all should have equitable social and economic conditions so that all can have what is needed for their well-being will take root, blossom and grow among us. Christians often focus on a heavenly dwelling that has little to do with this earth and its policies. The hope we are given is not, so to speak, merely a vertical hope; it is also a horizontal hope. Yes, as we move through Advent to celebrate the coming of Jesus into this world to reconcile us with God, we remember there is also his promise to reconcile us to each other and the creation in the new heaven and the new earth. This alternative reality is rooted and grounded in a claim about God’s faithfulness—and the bridging of the gap between our present reality and the promised future is only possible by an act of faith that God’s righteousness will triumph—confidence in God’s righteousness enables belief in a new reality. God’s promise always includes justice and righteousness so we remain hopeful while we wait. We wait for the coming again of our Lord, for the one who will bring us peace with justice, joy with righteousness. Because our God does not promise one without the other. We’ve had over 2,000 years of practice at this waiting, but somehow that practice at waiting for Jesus to come back hasn’t yet been perfected. Many have spent the time trying to figure out just when, how and for whom Jesus will come back. There is a theological argument that Christ is waiting on us to figure out how to live according to the ways of the kingdom before he returns. The passage which we read from Luke this morning, comes from near the end of the gospel narrative. Like the passage from Mark last week, it is drawn from a longer apocalyptic discourse in which Jesus warns of coming persecutions and foretells the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. He describes his Parousia—his second coming—in terms which are reminiscent of the Daniel 7 text. As elsewhere in apocalyptic scriptures in this text from Luke we find Jesus speaking of persecution, of famine, of war and of sufferings. These also always contain within them a note of warning, a warning that there will be judgment and terrors both as cosmic signs of the end times. The first Advent texts set before us the warning that the “nations” will be “distressed” and “anxious” which seems at first a paradox when Advent also sets before us the message of “good news of great joy for all the people” as we prepare to celebrate the arrival of our “new born king.” As odd as it seems when we begin our journey with these images, there is wisdom in it. A paradox requires that we respond with “both/and” thinking, instead of the absolute of “either/or” which we tend to prefer. A dictionary definition of a paradox which I liked defined one as “a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a possible truth.” In our society today keeping a space available for paradox is difficult. Our nation is divided and obsessed with “either/or” logic—you are either for or against, either with us or against us. Yet our scriptures, are full of both/and statements about Jesus—the infant born in a stable to lowly peasants but was also proclaimed a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Both losing one’s life and keeping it by losing it are in his instructions to followers. Jesus in our text today reminds his followers that more is going on in this world that meets the eye which is precisely why we must “watch” and “stay awake at all times.” Jesus calls his disciples to be prepared and aware. As we move deeper into the Christmas season, we need to not be myopic in single-mindedly over-preparing for celebrating that long ago event—no matter how important it was and is. We need to remember that it was part of God’s vision for the world—a vision that is God’s to control—a vision that has a scope

far broader and more expansive than any either/or thinking can allow. What is at stake as we make this journey is reminding ourselves is that the coming of the kingdom of heaven is part of this journey. An Jesus reminds us, the kingdom is both already here and not yet here because we live between the two great poles of God's intervention into historical time. These two poles are the coming of Christ in the flesh and his triumph over death—and the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time and his triumph over all the powers of earth and heaven. These are the "in-between time" which although fraught with tension, is nevertheless also characterized by hope as both the beginning and the ending of the story of the body of Christ on earth. The ending of the story has been secured by Christ. We are therefore free to struggle, to wait, to work, to witness—indeed to live and die—with hope because we have been given to know the end of the story. Despite all the dire events which may happen in the brokenness of our world—we know that God's victory over all brokenness will come. The victory has already been won despite any appearances to the contrary. As we celebrated last week Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, so although we need to remain alert so we may witness and work toward those things which God desires to come into our world—the victory is actually out of our hands. So we are called to remain faithful citizens of the alternative reality of God's vision of justice and righteousness in the land—and this means we can truly remain hopeful as we prepare for both celebrating God's entry into history as the infant Jesus and the longed for return when peace and goodwill for all will reign. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.