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 First Sunday of Advent

The Promise of Hope
Jeremiah 33:14-16

*¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”*

These are the words of the prophet Jeremiah,
He was actually known as the weeping prophet.
 He was writing from prison,
 after the Babylonian empire had come and destroyed the first temple in Jerusalem around the year 587 BC, and took many of the people into exile in Babylon.
 It was a time of total ***devastation*** for God’s people.
 They were crushed, emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

And Jeremiah was called by God
 to speak to the people about their situation,
 their unfaithfulness,
 but also about the comfort of God in this time of trial,
 and the hope of days to come—***when God would restore them.***

Here Jeremiah is talking about the hope of ONE who is to come,
 who is the embodiment of truth, justice and righteousness,
 one who will come from the line of David,
 and bring salvation.

We know now that he is talking about our Savior Jesus Christ—
 over 500 years before Jesus was born.
 But at the time, the people hearing these words of hope couldn’t see that,
 they didn’t know how or if they should believe any promises of hope.

And aren’t WE like that today?
Isn’t it HARD to believe in hope, when life is a mess?

When our *health* has failed, or our *bank account* is empty?
 Isn't it hard to have hope,
 when our *job* is a dead-end,
 or our *family* is at odds with one another?
 Isn't it hard to have hope,
 when the *world seems to be going down* the drain?

And yet, hope is what God offers to all of us.

In fact, in Jeremiah 29:11 the weeping prophet shares
 some of the *most beautiful and hopeful* words in the Old Testament,
 words you might have memorized:

*¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
 plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

A future with hope.

Isn't that what we all *want*?
 And *need*?

I truly believe what I was once told in seminary:

That behind every single face, in every single pew, is a private sorrow.
 That is true.
 We ALL struggle, with something.

So it follows that we ALL need a word of hope, right?

Don't you?
 Especially at Christmastime?

I believe that offering hope is part of my calling—

I'm here to share the *Good News of the Gospel* each week,
 so that we can *leave with a word of hope* in our hearts from God.

But does that mean that all hope is smiles and good feelings?

I don't think so.

I believe that hope is sometimes found in the midst of our tears,
 and that's why the weeping prophet has so much to teach us about *real hope*.

***Professor Kate Bowler says that hope can sound ridiculous
 when your life is falling apart.***

Boy isn't that the truth?

But what if hope is really like *'bread crumbs' of beauty* happening right now?
 And beauty that has happened before in our lives?
 What if hope means that even if you cannot see the future,
good things are still possible, even today?

Kate Bowler, What It Means to Hope, youtube.com

This year our Advent theme is from Duke Professor Kate Bowler's
 Advent devotional, entitled *'A Weary World Rejoices'*.

It's from the first verse of the hymn *'O Holy Night'*

*O Holy night, the stars are brightly shining,
 It is the night of our dear Savior's birth
 Long lay the world in sin and error pining
 'Til He appeared, and the soul felt its worth
 A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
 For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn
 Fall on your knees: o hear the angel voices
 O night divine, O night when Christ was born*

Seems fitting, right?

We are ALL weary, in some way or another.

And yet this is a season when we find reasons for rejoicing.
 Because it is the season of Christ's birth.

Bowler says that Advent offers us *'permission to see the world as it really is,
 while still hoping for a future we can sometimes only glimpse'*.

Seeing the world as it really is
 means we can ***let go of simple platitudes and expressions***
 that we think make people feel better, when they actually can cause pain.

Things like *'Everything happens for a reason'* or
'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger'.

In reality, platitudes like that are ***a bit crazy***, and sometimes even ***hurtful***.

Because what we know as Christians is NOT that.

We know that life is a mess.

And we cannot begin to understand it or even accept it at times.

***Everything does NOT happen for a reason,
because we live in a fallen, broken world.***

And some things are just garbage,
and they don't make anyone stronger, just broken.

But—***God IS at work*** in our world.

We live in the ***already-not-yet world***, as followers of Jesus Christ.

He has ***ALREADY come*** into this world in the flesh, lived, died and was raised—
for us, for our new life, for our hope.

But, ***he has NOT YET returned*** to make all things right in the world.

So, we live in the ***in-between time***.

We see GLIMPSES of goodness and grace and truth—but we STILL suffer.

I personally don't understand it, and I don't know anybody who does.

But I know this much is true—

there is pain in this world, and in our lives,

And, there is ALSO God's goodness, God's peace, and God's love.

There IS love—even where we least expect it.

And that is Good News.

That is ***hope***.

But much of the time, we embrace life—through TEARS.

Theologian N.T. Wright says that

sometimes there is no answer in life, except to lament.

Sometimes the only appropriate response to life, is weeping.

Some of the bravest people I know are those whose tears flow freely.

Because life is a colossal mess.

And sometimes the best thing we can do, is just cry with one another.

Not offer 'answers' or platitudes,

just tears, and presence.

Presence means everything in tough times.

It means a lot to just show up.

Just be there.

Just make a call, a visit, send a card, or a text of prayer.

It's usually better than all the platitudes in the world.

N.T. Wright was once asked by Kate about the *most comforting scriptures* in the Bible to him. And he said that for him, the story of the resurrection in John 20 always comes to mind.

But not just because of the resurrection of Jesus.

It's because of Mary—she comes in the dark, she weeps at the tomb, but in her weeping—she sees two angels and the risen Lord.

Peter and John also go to the empty tomb, but they leave without these revelations. So Wright wonders, *what if new creation is easier seen—through tears?*

What if tears can be like a LENS for us, to see God?

Kate Bowler and N.T. Wright, Comfort and Hope for the Future of the Church, youtube.com

What if that is good news, and hope, for all who weep, mourn, or lament?

What if that's good news for those who are sad about the pain of our world, and our lives?

What if our tears are not necessarily harmful,

What if they could be a lens, to see God?

Mary was able to see two angels in that empty tomb, and the gardener who was the risen Lord, AS SHE WEPT.

She saw the sacred in this life through her tears.

So, what if we can too?

What if that's part of living in the already-not-yet time?

We see the pain all around us and within us, but we **ALSO SEE the sacred.**

We see God-sightings.

Think about the last time you had a God-sighting—what was it?

Where were you? What happened?

What if we pay attention to those little rays of holy light shining into our hearts and lives,

Right when we need it the most?

What if we can all see little moments of grace, peace, and love, right in the midst of our broken world?

And what if we were to take note?

Do you take your God-sightings to heart?

Do you sometimes write them down, so you don't forget?

What if we shared them with those closest to us, so we can celebrate them?
How could you do that?

My Dad died during the early days of covid on March 22nd 2020,
 so I had talked to him on the phone,
 but I hadn't seen him for a couple weeks before his death—
 unless you count seeing just his forehead on Facetime,
 because he couldn't understand where to hold the phone for a video chat!

But in February I had been able to stay with him,
 while my mom was out of town,
 and we were able to laugh, and eat, and dance around the house a bit
 (there's always dancing in our family),
 even though I knew that he felt pretty bad with his heart failure and memory
 problems, and all the rest.

And I still treasure the moments of joy we shared.
 I still laugh when I think about his antics.
 He was a severe diabetic who liked to sneak sweets,
 and he had this look of innocence when caught in the act...so funny!

Dad was the #1 dancer in the family,
 and last Christmas we felt like dancing after opening the gifts,
 and this summer we finally had a barn dance—
 one we never got to have for his birthday in June 2020.
 Honoring his memory with joy, is a true God-sighting!

My God-sightings these days are often in nature,
 or when I'm visiting someone at home, or in the hospital,
 or listening to someone's story, because such stories are sacred,
 or serving people communion, or baptizing them like today!

Where do YOU see God?

Where do you see HOPE?

Where do you see rays of light in the midst of your pain?
 Can you open your heart to see how God might be bringing you hope?
 Could some of your tears be a lens, for you to see God this Christmastime?

Jeremiah spoke the very words of God—words of hope.

Words that saw the pain all around, and still saw God's hand
and God's power and God's love!

In the Upper Room this week, I read this by Steve Harper:

*Prophets move us by means of visions...and visions are not things too good to be true, they are things **too good to not be true...***

*[Prophets] do not ignore hard things,
but they understand that **challenges do not define us,
hope defines us!***

Steve Harper, "Let's Hope So", Upper Room Disciplines online, November 26, 2024.

What if we let HOPE define us this Christmas?

Not our pain, not our past, not the dysfunction of our families.

But the hope of God.

The hope of Jesus Christ—who came into this world,
in the flesh, as a tiny crying baby.

Jesus, who lived as a humble servant,

who died innocently,

Who was raised—that we might have new life.

Who is coming back---to make all things right in the world!

Hope is what truly defines us—especially at Christmas.

We are people of hope as followers of Jesus Christ.

May we seek and find the hope that we all so desperately need.

And for the ***Good News of Hope***, all God's people can say together, Amen.

