

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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December 2, 2018
First Sunday of Advent
Jeremiah 33:14-16

Living the Hope of God's Love

There are any number of ways to count or mark the passage of time. And when we do—that is mark the passage of time—there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. Sometimes the time frame centers on an event or activity. Each of the various organized athletic sports has a such a calendar. And while there are official beginnings and endings to sports calendars, one's particular perspective influences the specifics. So for example, when the overall football season inclusive of all levels won't officially end until the Super Bowl game the first weekend in February, it came to a screeching halt unfortunately in Fargo, North Dakota yesterday for the MSU Bobcats football team.

Of course in our larger cultural context, we mark the passage of time with a 12-month calendar that includes 52 weeks and 365 days. It begins on January 1 and ends on December 31. So that puts us today in the tail-end of the year right now. Alternatively, with an academic focus, the year begins in late August or early September and runs through May each year. From that perspective, we're just coming to the end of the first quarter of the year. We in the church use this education-based calendar as we think of the various activities in which we engage as a church. This is why we launched a new church wide focus in September on *Learning and Living God's Love, Together*, knowing that it would carry us on through until next summer.

There is yet another way that we in the church mark time—that is through the liturgical or sacred seasons of the year. It just so happens that we are beginning such a new year right now today, on this first Sunday of Advent. Our worship space and church building have been adorned and decorated inside and out as a visible sign that something new is afoot.

It is absolutely appropriate for Advent to be a time of preparing for and getting ready for our celebration of the birth of Jesus on Christmas. The coming of Jesus into the world as a human baby is a big deal that has earthshattering and history-shaking consequences. But Advent is more than simply a countdown to Christmas. It is a lot more than a time to look back and celebrate. It's also, even more so, a time of new beginnings that has our sights set on the future.

One of the ways that we do this looking to the future is to lift up those times and places in the history of the people of God, as we find it in the scriptures, to better understand how our forebears lived as those looking to the future. Because the orientation of those who lived as the Hebrews in the Old Testament and as Christians in the New Testament is a future orientation where the people of God find hope for the future in the midst of present day realities which oftentimes was a reality of despair, we can find inspiration for our present-day future hope as well.

Each year in Advent then, we turn to the prophets of the Old Testament to help us find and uncover that hope. As an extension of our year-long focus on Learning and Living God's Love, Together, we're looking at the words of some of these prophets as a way of learning and living the hope we find in God's love.

Jeremiah was a prophet of God, and like the other prophets in the Hebrew Bible, he was the mouthpiece of God. Prophets were not diviners who were able to see and predict the precise historical events that were to come. Rather they were conduits of the message that God had for the people to whom the prophet was speaking. In Jeremiah's case, as we read in these three short verses, he proclaims, "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." (Jer. 33:15)

These few words packed a punch to those who heard it or read it in the Biblical texts. Justice and righteousness were two qualities that were in short supply and not at all in evidence as the Hebrew people were in exile. To proclaim that justice and righteousness were on the way was a powerful word of hope—hope to which the people of God could cling as they lived through their exiled lives. Hope which had been elusive is now being promised as coming from God.

As we lit the first candle of our Advent wreath this morning, it was hope that was named as what we long for as we await the coming of Jesus.

In our contemporary 21st century world, it is striking that hope is needed as much or more than it ever has been. For we are surrounded by forces and realities that are more likely to drag us down and lead to despair rather than to hope.

The day after Thanksgiving, the Fourth National Climate Assessment (NCA4), completed in November 2018, a comprehensive and authoritative report from the US government on climate change and its impacts in the United States was released to the public. It is a report that is striking in its warnings to us as the people of the earth.

CNN summarized the report with what it calls 15 takeaways from this report. I share just the headline of each takeaway and encourage you to read in more detail.

1. Crop production will decline.
2. Cows could have it bad.
3. Food sources from the sea will decline.
4. Food and waterborne illness will spread.
5. Bugs will bug us more. That means diseases such as dengue, chikungunya and Zika will be more widespread.
6. It will be hard to breathe.
7. Mental health will be challenged.
8. More of us will die [prematurely].
9. We won't be able to work as much.
10. We won't be able to get around as easily.
11. Water infrastructure will be challenged.
12. Floods will be more frequent.
13. Wildfires will increase.
14. History will be lost. For example, sea level rise will ultimately wipe out the record of human habitation of the coastal margin in the Southeast within the next one or two centuries.
15. There will be more snakes and other invaders such as pine bark beetles.
(<https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/26/health/climate-change-report-15-takeaways/index.html>)

I share this summary with you with the encouragement that each of us more closely pay attention to this important document that is a dire warning for us to heed and respond. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. And we are the people of God, entrusted to be God's stewards of the

earth our home. This issue is of paramount importance for us as people of Christian faith. It is no longer one issue among many.

Jody and I attended the 7th Parliament of the World's Religions in Toronto one month ago. During this 6-day event in which more than 7500 people from over 80 countries representing over 200 religious and spiritual traditions gathered to covenant with one another to together be a positive force for the healing of the world. With its theme of "The Promise of Inclusion, the Power of Love:

Pursuing Global Understanding, Reconciliation, and Change," one of the 3-hour morning plenary sessions was devoted to this issue of climate action. During this session we heard from 10 speakers who spoke from a wide variety of perspectives on the critical importance of people of faith leading the way to needed change.

For me, one of the most memorable speakers was Christiana Figueres, an internationally recognized leader on global climate change whose efforts were instrumental in bringing about the historical Paris Agreement of 2015. She said that there are three temptations we must overcome when addressing climate change. The first temptation is to look at the past and blame. She said rather we need to expand the arc of our love. Everyone must do the right the thing now. The second temptation is believing there is a contradiction between what we want and what mother earth needs, when in fact what mother earth needs is what we want—prosperity and health and wholeness for all. And the third temptation is to feel frustrated and angry and to give up. Rather, she said, we must nourish our arc of conviction. Each of us must do what we can, where we can, when we can.

It was amazing to me that while this part of the parliament was filled with unsettling, disturbing and even frightening information regarding global climate change that could easily lead to overwhelming despair, the ultimate message to this gathering of people of faith was to inspire us to be the positive force that can indeed speak to the hearts of the people of the world in order to bring about a change of heart that will lead to positive action that will then lead to a brighter tomorrow for our children, grandchildren and the generations to come.

The situation in which Jeremiah, the prophet, addressed the people of God, certainly was as dire as it gets. And his word of hope was one that indeed would lead to a change in the hearts and actions of God's people.

As Christians we understand Jeremiah's prophecy of hope as also speaking to a much longer term promise by God—that a messiah who would bring about a deliverance unlike any other is promised.

In our day, we are called by God through the prophecy of the Hebrew Bible, and by the testament of faith in the lives of those who testify to the incarnation of God in Jesus, to a hope that transcends the despair and hopelessness that is looming all around us today.

And on this first day of Advent, the beginning of the ways in which we mark time in the sacred calendar, we are called to the table of Jesus as we renew our faith and our commitment by sharing in the body of Christ and the blood of Christ—the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. When we come to this table in just a bit, we proclaim our ultimate—second to none—loyalty to the one who is the source of our lives, the source of our world, and the source of our hope.

And after we step away from this table of holy communion, we will do so to go forth living the hope of God's love.