

First Sunday in Advent
November 29, 2015
Marley United Methodist Church, Glen Burnie

Jeremiah 33.14-16
Psalm 25.1-10
1 Thessalonians 3.9-13
Luke 21.25-36

THE NEW BRANCH

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The season of Advent is all about hope and anticipation. It is a time of dreaming dreams and waiting expectantly on God. It is a time when we prayerfully imagine the new things God will be doing. A time when we stand on tip toes and crane our necks to catch a glimpse of the dawning day of God's justice and peace, of God's coming kingdom.

But whatever the season of Advent might be wanting to say, this is not an easy time to feel hopeful in the Church, is it? In fact, it would be a very easy time to be feeling depressed about the state of the church and about its future. I know we are comfortable here at Marley, and we really don't want to hear any unpleasantness, but there are any number of indicators about the church at large, pointing in all the wrong directions. In this country, and across most of the western world, rates of church membership and attendance are in spiraling decline.

Back in the year 2000 44% of the residents of Glen Burnie reported no religious affiliation. In 2010 62% of the residents report no religious affiliation – that is a 38% increase. That is a trend heading in the wrong direction. (cf *www.city-data.com*)

Some major denominations in this country face almost inevitable extinction within a decade or so because their membership is almost entirely elderly and they have few young people coming in. Our congregation in Lake Wales, Florida, large as it is, will probably lose about 50% of their membership in the next 10 years – I mean, I look at just the choir and

realize that Marnie and I are amongst the 4 youngest of the 35 or so members. Who is going to be left in 10 more years?

In some parts of the world churches are growing rapidly, but many of us have mixed feelings about that because too many of them show the kinds of hostile conservatism and ungracious militancy which leaves us feeling embarrassed.

As far as the state of the world is concerned – well, you read the newspapers and listen to the news as well as I do. Luke put it well in 21.26 when he said, “People will be fainting from fear and from the expectation of what is coming on the world”. And from this fear in today’s world we pull back from the stranger and the needy, close our borders and hunker down, saying what a pity it is, I’ll pray about it, feeling in that we’ve done enough.

So, what wonderful future should we be anticipating? Is talking about hope in God’s future anything more than a bit of escapist fantasy?

There was an image in our first reading which tells us that this is not the first time God’s people have faced such agonizing questions. It also tells us something about the kind of hope that can meaningfully be expressed in such times. It is an image that has come to be so commonly associated with the season of Advent that it is often represented in the design of Advent banners and, sometimes, bulletin covers; it is a cut down tree stump with a single new growth sprouting from it. The classic Biblical expression was not in today’s reading from the prophet Jeremiah, because it is found in Isaiah (11:1) who says “a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”

Although today’s passage from Jeremiah doesn’t actually mention the stump, when it speaks of God “causing a righteous Branch to spring up,” it is appealing to the same commonly understood image. These were not isolated sayings. They drew on a well-known idea that was very much alive in the popular imagination of the day. It was still a well-known image in the early days of the Church and Paul quotes it in his letter to the

Romans: "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." (15:12)

Now it may have been a well-known image back then, but it may not be so well known now, so some of you might like me to explain that the name "Jesse" refers to the father of King David. So a new branch springing from the root of Jesse firstly suggests that after the royal line that began with David had become corrupt and been cut off, a new and worthy king is appearing.

And both Jeremiah and Isaiah speak of this new branch being one who will "bring about justice and righteousness in the land." So, what the prophets first imagined was a new king arising from the failed monarchy and proving to be a good king who does what is right. Jeremiah tells us 'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made and cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.'

Now I want to reflect for a minute on one of the things that happens in this passage and these prophecies in general. These names, like the "righteous branch" or, at the end of the passage, the one who will be called "The Lord is our righteousness"; these names or titles seem to keep shifting in who they are being applied to. On the one hand there is clearly an expectation that they refer to one person, a new king, born from the line of David. But on the other hand, they also keep getting applied to the nation as a whole, as is indeed the case with the last line of our Jeremiah passage – the title 'The Lord is our righteousness' is applied to Jerusalem. So, a question: is the anticipated messiah just a single individual, or is it also the people as a whole who are chosen and anointed by God to bring salvation and blessing to the world? You can't quite nail the prophets down on this point.

And indeed we see the same thing happening in the writings of the New Testament. Messianic identity is related firstly and apparently exclusively to Jesus, but then we start to get all these images and descriptions that speak of the church as "his body" and his followers as the 'bearers of his light in to the world'. The Messiah, it seems, has so identified himself with

us that he becomes us and we become him and the language about ‘God’s chosen anointed one’ keeps sliding back and forth between Jesus and us.

Christian author Athol Gill reminds us that whenever we pray and ask God to act in the world, we had better be aware that God just might use us to be the answer to our own prayer. And so, indeed, it seems that when we pray for the Messiah to come bringing salvation and blessing and hope to the world, God just might respond by calling us to be a people who do just that.

So perhaps it is not too presumptuous to think that maybe we are being called to be a righteous branch springing up to bring good news to a troubled and frightened world. Especially in a time when the church seems to be, if not cut down, then at least whittled away somewhat, and in danger of being reduced to an unpromising stump.

Allow me issue a warning here. Any time anyone begins to think of themselves as a chosen people some serious dangers arise.

The long drawn out bitter war between Israel and Palestine is a loud warning of what happens when a people who identify themselves as God’s chosen people forget that when God chooses people they are not chosen to be God’s privileged favorites, but they are chosen to be a blessing to the world.

The chosen people of God are called to bear witness to God’s all-embracing love and his mercy – a mercy that never plays favorites but rather lays down its life for all – without exception and without limit.

And so clearly any call to us to be a new branch springing to life from the old stump is not to be understood as a claim of special privileges or favored status, but as a call to radical faithfulness, to a self-sacrificial living out of God’s justice and righteousness as we proclaim and share God’s overflowing love and mercy.

So, the sort of hope we lean into in this season of Advent is no escapist fantasy of the glory days a-coming when the Church will regain its lost

prestige and power and conquer the world. But neither is it a denial of the tough realities of our present predicaments.

Both this passage from Jeremiah and the passage from Luke's gospel sound a message of hope against a backdrop of earth's troubles: the death, destruction and turmoil of today is that not much different from back then. In preparing a study on a related subject I learned that 60 years after the birth of Jesus, fanatical Israelites carried daggers beneath their cloaks in order to attack Roman citizens on the street – seems to me I read something that sounded a lot like that in the news a week or so ago.

This image of the new branch that emerges reminds us that the only way it can emerge is to stick its head up and risk whatever the world brings. In the face of death and disaster it is a fragile hope, it is just a little, new branch, of small and seemingly insignificant value – but it is the first of the new beginnings.

And it is also an image we find at the heart of the gospel we profess. It is an image that captures a pattern of how God operates over and over down through history and which has been revealed most clearly to us in Jesus the Christ, who was himself the righteous branch from the stump of Jesse.

What the prophets told us, and what Jesus has shown us, is that even when God's work is destroyed by the corruptions and scandals and failures of God's people or by the attacks and violent hatred of others, there is nothing ever so dead or so cut down and destroyed that God cannot bring life bursting forth again.

This is the hope that was born in a manger in Bethlehem.

This is the hope that was born again from the tomb in the garden.

“And there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars, and on the earth nations will be in distress. . . People will be fainting from fear and from the expectation of what is coming on the world, . . . Then they will see the Son of Man arriving in a cloud with power and great glory. . . .(W)hen these things begin to happen, stand up and raise

your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (*Luke 21.25-36*)

This is the hope for which we pray,

This is the hope for which we offer ourselves,
that we might be born again as a new branch
of God's fragile but irrepressible life and love in the world.

Amen