

An Alternative Reality

Jeremiah 33:14-16 (November 28, 2021)

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¹⁴The 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. ¹⁵In 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. ¹⁶In 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.”

Historical Context

The prophet Jeremiah speaks at a time when Jerusalem has been completely devastated in the Babylonian invasion of 587 BCE, and the inhabitants of Israel have been scattered from their homeland, living as conquered people in Babylonian captivity.

Theme: An Alternative Reality

Advent is a season for feeling out of kilter. It is a period of waiting in the darkness. It is a season in which we are caught between joyful expectation and the harsh realities of the present condition while we wait for the promise to be fulfilled. And the discipline of this season puts us out of sync with contemporary American culture, in which the holiday season consists of bright lights and celebrations and packages tied with neat bows. Yet ironically, this experience of being out of sync with our surroundings may attune us more deeply to the nature of Advent. In Advent, we live in the unsettling tension between what is and what will be.

For those living at the time of Jeremiah, the experience of exile is one of profound dissonance. This generation lives in the wide gap between the reality of what is and the promise of what will be. In fact, the hardship of the present reality must make the covenant promises seem far from reach. Jeremiah offers a vision of a new reality. We should not underestimate what a daring proclamation this is. In the face of devastation, with all evidence to the contrary, Jeremiah insists that God’s promises are certain.

Jeremiah’s oracle imagines an alternative reality: the restoration of Israel, the practice of justice and righteousness, and flourishing life in the land that God has promised. Yet the prophet does not simply cast utopian visions of life as it once was or as the people desire it to be. Empty promises are little comfort for homelessness, broken dreams, and tarnished memories.

Rather, this alternative reality is grounded in a claim about God’s faithfulness. Bridging the chasm between the present reality and the promised future is only possible by an act of faith that God’s righteousness will triumph.

In Advent, the church proclaims an alternative reality that grows out of confidence in God’s righteousness. The promise of God’s righteousness both convicts and makes new. Advent invites us to name the places in our lives and 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 so. And yet the promise of Advent is that the Lord is our righteousness. This promise allows us to proclaim an alternative reality in which all things will be made new.