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Advent 1C
Peace, Seattle
December 2, 2012
Jeremiah 31:14-16

A BLOSSOMING FUTURE

Toward the end of the film masterpiece, Return of the King, the final episode in the Lord of the Rings trilogy, as the dark minions of Mordor mass for battle, and the end of all that is good seems inevitable, the story takes us to the white city of Gondor, Minas Tirith.

Gondor represents the world's last, best hope, but the steward of its throne has tipped the scale toward madness, and now the fate of the whole inhabited world lies on a knife's edge.

At the pinnacle of the alabaster city's mountain bulkhead, in the plaza high above the plain where the decisive battle will be joined, stands the white tree of Gondor.
- It is a symbol of the nation's long kingly heritage, it's dignity, endurance, wisdom, and fruitfulness.
- But the once great tree has lost all its leaves, and the bare limbs that remain seem to portend that the noble tree, like the nation itself, is destined for oblivion.

YET, as the siege of Minas Tirith begins, and casualties mount, we watch, inexplicably, as a single white blossom on the tree—unheralded and unnoticed—opens(!); a sign that, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, all is not lost, and a future with hope is still a possibility.

It's the same kind of context that forms the backdrop for the two short verses of Jeremiah which greet us this first Sunday of Advent.

Pitching his voice to the ears of exiles who have long given up hope, Jeremiah trumpets God's promise in a new key:

THE DAYS ARE SURELY COMING, SAYS THE LORD, WHEN I WILL FULFILL THE PROMISE
I MADE TO ISRAEL AND JUDAH.
IN THOSE DAYS I WILL CAUSE A RIGHTEOUS BRANCH TO SPRING UP FROM DAVID;
AND HE SHALL EXECUTE JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE LAND.
JUDAH WILL BE SAVED AND JERUSALEM WILL LIVE IN SAFETY.

Brother Martin called it "the little book of comfort," four chapters, which, like an oasis, are found inexplicably within the withering, desert landscape which is the book of the prophet Jeremiah.

And the upshot of those four chapters?
- Fifty years of Babylonian captivity would end, wounds would be healed, fortunes restored,
- God would change hats from judge to doting father and lead the exiled people home.

This morning, two verses give us a close-up view of that oasis. And what do we see?
- That God isn't finished dreaming yet.
- That the ancient covenant with the house of David will come to flower once more.
- That God will turn his face toward the people again, and justice and safety will follow them home.

Adjacent verses fill in God's vision:
- Towns, once desolate, will echo with laughter once more;
- brides and grooms will start families again;
- Farmers and ranchers will raise songs of thanksgiving for a land no longer barren, singing:

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GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD, FOR THE LORD IS GOOD,
FOR GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER! (Jer. 33:10-11)

How would these words coming off Jeremiah's lips have sounded, if not like the stuff of pure fantasy? If not as if Jeremiah, too, had tipped the scale toward madness?

YET, it is just such promises as these, and on a scale beyond us, of which Advent is made.

Which leads us to the main point: If these grand promises given voice by Jeremiah are to be fulfilled it is certainly not you are I that will make it so.

Writing to a friend from death row at a Nazi prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way:

> "A…cell like this is a good analogy for Advent; one waits, hopes, does this or that—ultimately negligible things—the door is locked and can only be opened from the outside."[1]

And this, ultimately, is the point of the promise we hear from Jeremiah this morning:
That One from the outside has broken in. That this righteous branch, which Isaiah called, the "shoot from Jesse's stump," is none other than Jesus; God with us.

We may wonder at times whether, when we hear the key turn in the lock, if is freedom that awaits us, or the executioner. But even then, as Bonhoeffer himself showed us, THE END OF THIS LIFE IS BUT A BEGINNING.

LOOK AT THE FIG TREE, Jesus says, AMID MOUNTING SIGNS OF GLOOM AND DOOM, KEEP YOUR EYES TRAINED JUST THERE, SEE HOW NEAR GOD'S REIGN HAS ALREADY COME, THE REIGN OF HIM WHO IS ABLE TO RESTORE ALL LIFE TO ITS FULLEST.

The question we're left with, then, since we have no control over endings, is:
How do we function together as community as we await that new BEGINNING, that ADVENT, which is God's promise to us in Jesus?

Two things come to mind. First, we renew within ourselves and within our households the basic practices that keep God's promise before us.

- We light the Advent candles at home.
- We read the scriptures.
- We gather around this Table.
- We notice our neighbors in need.
- We pray for eyes that will enable us see one another and the world as Christ sees us—compassionately, forgivingly, lovingly.
- We learn again to took to God to complete what is unfinished in our lives and make them whole.

Second, we engage in what one writer calls "the strenuous and crucial Christian task of imagination."[2] For without imagination to help us envision God's promised future, it can only be despair—not hope—that becomes our companion. And despair can never lead us to our true home.

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[1] *Letters and Papers from Prison.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009) p. 188, 189.
[2] Jennifer Ryan Ayres, *Feasting on the Word.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) pp. 4, 6.

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The future of hope that is God's gift to us this day in Christ Jesus does not lead us away from life in the present but roots us, like the fig tree, more firmly and faithfully within it, and it does so precisely because this present time, these lives we live, are the very places where God, hidden in the child born of Mary, hidden in the crucified and risen one, reigns.[3]

> "If the future were not the promise of Jesus Christ but the predictable outcome of present trends," writes James Kay, "despair would overwhelm us…but the message [we cling to in] Advent is that we can never take our own projections more seriously than God's promises."[4]

With Jeremiah, with brother Dietrich, and with all the exiles of this and every age, we lean into God's promised future, trusting that he has already met us there, and will do so again, in Jesus. Amen.

[3] Marc Kolden. *Texts in Context, Word & World* 11/4, 1991. Pages 446-7.
[4] James F Kay, *Redemption Draws Near*, in *The Christian Century*, 11/12/97.