

“Longing”
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Sunday, November 29, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

The story is told about a young boy who, at one of the Christmas Eve candlelight services at his church, expressed his excitement. Immediately after the benediction, this four year old broke out, at the top of his lungs, with, “Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! Jesus is born! Jesus is born! Let’s get going!”

It seems the boy’s parents had told him that he could not open his gifts until after the church service. Waiting was difficult for him, so just as soon as the service was over, he was thrilled that he could get on to the things that mattered most to him. That boy didn’t understand the true meaning of Christmas, but he certainly caught its excitement. “Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! Jesus is born! Jesus is born! Let’s get going!” (John Jewell, quoted by King Duncan).

The season of Advent is a time of waiting. The word, “advent,” from the Latin, means “to come.” During Advent we wait for the Savior to come. We wait for the baby Jesus to be born in a manger, and we wait for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to come in fullness of power at the end of the age.

That’s the adult version.

For children, the Advent season is a time of waiting for Santa to come and presents to be opened. It is a magical time of high hopes and expectations.

When Josh & Chris were younger, Roy and I would do what many parents do – we would get Advent calendars for the boys – the ones where they open a little window each day. Behind each window is a small picture or a little toy or a small piece of chocolate. The idea is to give a

young child something to look forward to each day of December, until the big day – Christmas! – is here. Otherwise, the anticipation can be more than a little person can bear.

The situation for Jeremiah and his people is a bit more dire than waiting for Santa to put presents under the tree. Jeremiah is not so much waiting as he is longing for the promised Messiah to come.

I. Held Captive.

In his time, the prophet Jeremiah foresees that God will not allow his people to continue in their sinful ways. The Jews are forsaking the laws of God. Some are even following after Baal, turning their backs on the one true God who brought them out of captivity in Egypt. Jeremiah warns that God will not long tolerate this behavior. Jeremiah's messages from the Lord are not popular at the time, and the people ignore his prophecies.

Now, in the passage we read this morning, Jeremiah speaks to a people held captive once again, this time in Babylon. Jeremiah interprets their predicament as being directly related to their sins against God.

Prisoners in Babylon, they are being enticed to forsake their Jewish ways, to make the best of a bad situation, and to forget about ever returning home. To these despairing people, Jeremiah writes, "The days are surely coming when all God's promises will be fulfilled.

Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor who writes about Advent in the midst of her ministry in the roughest part of the Bronx. In her book, Breathing Space, she writes:

"Probably the reason I love Advent so much is that it is a reflection of how I feel most of the time. I might not feel sorry during Lent, when the liturgical calendar begs repentance. I might not feel victorious, even though it is Easter morning. I might not feel full of the Spirit, even though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent, I

am always in sync with the season.

“Advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the Spanish word *anhelo*, or longing. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry of *anhelo* bursts forth: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!” (as quoted by Gary W. Charles).

We are held captive, like the Jewish hostages in Babylon. We long for freedom.

II. Longing for Freedom.

Jeremiah proclaims that a Branch will spring up for David; a new and righteous King for the people of David. Jeremiah proclaims the promises of God, that justice and righteousness will prevail, that “Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety” – “in those days.”

His prophecies seem ridiculous. Laughable. Jerusalem is burning. His people have been killed, kidnapped, and scattered to the winds. His people have been conquered. They are no longer a people; they are counted in the spoils of war. To the victor – Babylon – go the spoils.

Jeremiah wails and cries and weeps. He writes a book called “The Lamentations of Jeremiah.” He laments for his people. But his writings do not focus only on the destruction of Jerusalem and the sins of the people; he also reminds them of God’s future. He acknowledges the woes of the present, but points the people’s gaze toward God’s reality, which is a far better reality than the life they are tempted to accept in Babylon.

Jeremiah’s cry of longing, of *anhelo*, is a longing for God’s future. He longs for God; he reminds the people to long for God, in a time of great suffering and unimaginable loss. The people have lost everything – their homes, their freedom, their culture, their religion, their families. Now they are property of their captors. Jeremiah says, “Don’t dwell on these sufferings. They will pass. Remember that the days are coming when God’s promises will be

fulfilled. The Messiah, the Savior, the Branch of David, the true King will come” (paraphrase).

What are you longing for as we begin the four weeks of Advent? Are you longing for time with family? Maybe reconciliation of broken family relationships? Are you longing for a job, or a raise at your current job, so you can afford the gifts you would like to give at Christmas? Or maybe afford food for your children, and shelter to protect them, and clothing to keep them warm?

Maybe you are longing for healing for yourself or a loved one who is ill...longing for the return of a loved one who has died, or an end to the pain of a loved one who has left you through divorce, or the restoration of a loved one who is lost to you in drug addiction or mental illness.

Perhaps you are longing for an end to loneliness, or the courage to live another day in a life that drags you down and leaves you feeling isolated and different and hopeless and unlovable.

Maybe you're longing for healing in our society and in our world...for peace and joy and plenty for all God's people...for salvation for everyone...for all people to know the joy of life in Christ.

Your longings may be simple and practical – that your family won't fight as much this year at the holiday gatherings; that you'll get your gifts and your decorations and your cooking and your cleaning done in time for the Christmas guests to arrive; that you won't go off your diet too much at the holiday parties; that you will survive until the New Year, when you can make your resolutions and hopefully take a long winter's nap.

One pastor shares this list of Advent longings:

“I long for the day that is surely coming when in God's future the poor are not sent to shelters or forced to sleep on the streets. I long for the day that is surely coming when God's

future has no space for violence, when we will stop producing body bags – because there are no dead soldiers to fill them. I long for the day that is surely coming when God’s future affords no room for rancor, a day when our world is no longer torn asunder by racism and sexism and homophobia” (Gary W. Charles of Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia).

Whatever your longings may be, Jeremiah can relate. He longs for the fullness of God’s promises to be realized. He longs for the restoration of Jerusalem, for the people to return from captivity. He longs for the days when God will make all things right. In those days there will be no more hunger or war or slavery or violence or abuse or hatred. In those days there will be plenty of food for everyone and there will be security for every man, woman and child; protection from the violence of war and from the abuses of an unjust peace.

III. A Savior is Coming.

Advent is a confusing season. We long for a baby who has already been born. We wait for a Savior who is already among us. We watch for God’s future that is being born in us today. We look for Emmanuel, who came, and who is coming, and who lives among us right now.

Jeremiah shows us how to live in this here and not-yet-here time in which we long for God. We long for God’s future. At the same time, we receive with joy the future that God is already bringing into our present condition. We do not experience complete peace; but we catch glimpses of God’s peace. We do not show God’s love to one another in its fullness; but we do recognize in each other that God’s love is here. We do not exhibit the full perfection of hope and joy, but we see the new green sprouts of hope and joy emerging.

Jeremiah foretells the coming of Jesus when he writes, “In those days...I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David.” Jesus is that righteous branch. Jesus is the fulfillment of all God’s promises.

Virginia Owens "...suggests that we lose the wonder of it all, because along the way everything becomes 'merely.' Things are 'merely' stars, sunset, rain, flowers, and mountains. Their connection with God's creation is lost. During this Advent season many things are just 'merely.' It becomes 'merely' Bethlehem, a stable, a birth -- we have no feeling of wonder or mystery. That is what familiarity can do to us over the years.

"Owens goes on to say that it is this 'merely' quality of things that leads to crime. It is 'merely' a thing -- I'll take it. It is 'merely' an object -- I'll destroy it. It is this 'merely' quality of things and life that leads to war. We shall lose 'merely' a few thousand men, but it will be worth it. Within the Advent narrative nothing is 'merely.' Things are not 'merely' things, but are part of God's grand design. Common things, such as motherhood, a birth, a child, now have new meaning. This is not 'merely' the world, but a world that is charged with the beauty and grandeur of God's design. It is a world so loved by God that God gave his only Son. What is so great about the Advent season is that everything appears charged with the beauty and grandeur of God" (from God's Downward Mobility, by John A. Stroman).

The beauty and grandeur and love of God is revealed most completely in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment of all God's promises. Whether we know it or not, in all our longings, at the core of our deepest longings, is our true longing for Jesus Christ.

Closing.

This Advent I hope your longing for Jesus will spill over into a longing for others to know him, too. Maybe today you're in a place of wild anticipation, like the boy who yells "Hooray! Jesus is born! Let's get going!" on Christmas Eve. Maybe you are in a place of *anhele* like Pastor Heidi Neumark working among the poor in the Bronx. Maybe you are in a place of desperate longing and lament like the prophet Jeremiah, in anguish for his people.

Whatever your present state of being, I hope you will take the opportunity this holiday season to invite a friend to worship. Word of mouth is the most powerful form of advertising for the church. And the church is a place where people come to know Jesus.

As for you and me on this Sunday morning – Jesus is here. Jesus meets our deepest longings in his desire for relationship with us.

Come, Emmanuel. We long for you.

Amen.