

Acts of Hope

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ December 2, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

14 The 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. 15 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. 16 In 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."

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There are only 22 shopping days left till Christmas. This is the point at which those of you who are perpetual planners make sure that every day checks off some part of a long list. Advent is a season to make all kinds of sacrifices because year after year, the payoff on Christmas morning is a little bit of magic for everyone.

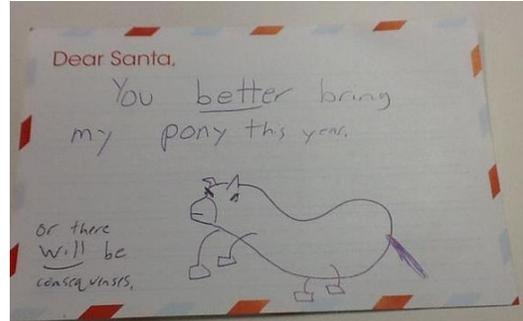
Some say, the season officially begins the Friday after Thanksgiving when the first shopper is trampled. I don't know, I've never been shopping on that day. Even children get into the planning sometimes by putting together their Christmas lists for Santa. But the letters look different than they did when I was a kid. Here are a couple letters from Santa:

Dear Santa, Please text my dad. He has my whole list.

Dear Santa, How are you? I'm good. Here is what I want for Christmas:
http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0032HF60M/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1410271945&sr=1

One more...here's a picture of it:

Dear Santa, You better bring my pony this year...or there will be consequences.¹



So many Christmas promises have been made, verbally, or have been assumed, and if all goes well, they will all be realized, three weeks from Tuesday.

But Advent is about the most important promise of all. A promise foretold by many of the prophets of the Old Testament. That against all odds, there would be a King from David's line that would rise up to bring righteousness and justice to all of the land and would restore a people that are living in darkness.

Our passage in Jeremiah picks up at a time when the darkness is descending. If it was practical to do so, I would have suggested that everyone read the 32 chapters leading up to this passage before today to really get a sense of it. I'm hoping maybe one or two people at least read the two chapters preceding.

Jeremiah made plans, too, precisely because of this promise that comes to us today. When we back up a chapter, we learn that Jeremiah has just purchased a piece of land. This may seem like a very normal thing to do, but he makes the purchase right after he said this:

*"Thus says the Lord: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it"*²

One commentator mentions what a truly foolish thing this is to do in a country that is about to be invaded by armies that have you seriously outnumbered—a battle that God has predicted you

² Jeremiah 32:3b

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<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/214132157256521087/?lp=true>

would lose badly and painfully. But she goes on to say, “Nevertheless, he has purchased the land as a pledge, as earnest of God’s redemption.”³

These were incredibly dark times. And these people, God’s people, could feel their world closing in. At a time when hope was starting to drain out, they really wanted their prophet, Jeremiah, to speak a word of how God was going to deliver them from their impending doom. They knew their own history:

- (1) When all seems hopeless, tell us to step into the water while we’re being chased by Pharaoh’s army, so it will part for us miraculously.
- (2) When all seems hopeless, that we will starve in the wilderness, tell us that manna will appear from the sky and water will flow from the rock.
- (3) When all seems hopeless, that we are lost, tell us to follow a pillar of fire so we’ll know the way.

But no, Jeremiah has preached doom on the people, so much so that it gets him thrown in prison. For all the hope in today’s passage, he’s certainly not a glass-half-full kind of guy. He’s more of a glass-is-about-to-shatter kind of guy. Not quite the prophesies they had hoped for.

But, then, right in the midst of this chaos, Jeremiah sits down and buys a field. A field that will do him no good for a very long time, and possibly the rest of his life. In fact, at the end of that chapter, God tells him to take the deed to the property, and put it in a special jar so it will last a really long time. In fact, it would be 70 years before a very few people that are left from that land would be able to return.

I wonder if anyone here has made an investment of any kind that you knew would not pay off for a very long time? Probably a few of you. Maybe most at some point. Retirement accounts are like that. And why? There’s a contract that goes with it. You would only do that if you had some information or *trust* or *promise* that it would be worth it in the end.

This morning, we receive words of hope to God’s people: “A righteous Branch (with a capital B in most translations) will come from David to rule, not only with justice, but *righteousness*...this is going to be a different kind of King—an out of this world kind of King. And this King was going to come from a lineage that was about to be completely cut off. Under King Nebuchadnezzar, the last King in David’s line would be pushed out, and would end the rule. God said David’s rule would NEVER end. It feels like a broken promise, the end of the line for the Israelite people. God had lost. This is why Isaiah says the branch will come out of the “stump” of Jesse. Stumps are remainders of trees that have no hope of growing back. They are dead beyond the hope of resurrection...or are they?

Jeremiah gives us more than just these *words* of hope in a hopeless situation. He *does* something. He does something foolish, something sacrificial, and something that says, “This situation only temporarily looks hopeless.”

Jeremiah buys a field. It’s a gift. A Christmas gift to his people to say that *this* is still the promised land. God is still on the throne. Our possessions will be restored, our property will be regained, our people are still God’s people. Sacrifice with me, and have hope.

Is it fair to say that moving into the end of 2018 does not necessarily feel like days filled with hope?

I learned today that the past three years have seen a downward trend in life expectancy...for the first time since World War II. Maybe not alarmingly so, but also not insignificantly. Modern medicine is improving. Infant mortality is declining. People should be living longer. The root of this decline is because of what professionals call “Diseases of Despair,” namely, suicide and drug overdose among younger and younger people.⁴

Are we entering dark times? Are we already there?

When Jeremiah says “The days are coming...” he is talking about a *later* time—after more immediate

³ Shifferdecker, Kathryn. *Commentary on Jeremiah 33:14-16*. www.workingpreacher.org

⁴ <https://www.health.com/condition/depression/life-expectancy-drug-overdose-suicide>

days that will get much worse. First, the days will become darker and darker, and seem more and more hopeless....*and then, God promises...*the light will come....and the *Branch* will grow out of the stump.

We need some gifts of hope this Christmas.

We need people, God's people, who are willing not only to speak words of hope, like the words we shared here in the symbols of Advent. We also need *acts* of hope. We need moments that look like foolishness to the rest of the world that trust in the promise of better things to come because God's promises can be trusted.

There are relationships among us that seem hopeless. A letter written from one person to another to restore a friendship is an act of hope, even if it seems foolish at the time.

There are financial situations among us that seem hopeless. A follow-up call on an opportunity that seems far-fetched is an act of hope no matter how it turns out. Perhaps it will lead to something else.

The direction of our mental or physical health may seem hopeless. A needed change in diet or an appointment with a professional is an act of hope.

Our walk with the Lord may feel dry to the point of no life on the horizon. A day away from work to be alone, to journal, to breathe, is an act of hope.

Acts of hope often seem foolish. Sometimes that's how you know the idea comes from outside yourself.

Acts of hope require sacrifice. It is an investment. You may even *know* that it will not turn out well at first. There is even a good chance you will never know the fruit of what you've done. Most people that met Jesus at the manger never knew about his death and resurrection.

The letter to the friend may be met with silence, but it might lead to the friend deciding to offer forgiveness to another person later in life.

The change you make in your physical health may actually lead to spiritual growth instead, making

you stronger and with a peace that passes understanding as your health declines, a witness to friends and family. I've seen this happen for people.

But there is an important element in Jeremiah's act of hope when he purchased the land we cannot miss..... *It was God who told him to do it.*

He had preached that the land would be restored, that a Messiah was coming. Maybe he even believed it! But purchasing the land was God's idea, and a little crazy.

I will admit that for many years as I grew in Christian faith, I would be a bit put off when people said that "God told them to." I never heard God. Maybe it was because God wasn't telling me to do anything. I have a good friend that from the moment we met in college was always talking about the things God told him to do. It was very specific things. He would say:

I was walking down the street one day, and God said, turn right here. I didn't want to turn, but I decided to turn anyway. And God led me to this homeless man, and a conversation that changed my life.

He has a ministry of working with homeless men, women, and children in Spokane. I'm sure during his many years of ministry, the homeless population has increased, the drug abuse has become worse, the dangers are greater. So why invest in these acts of hope, and develop a life where he is listening to God on the streets in every little area of life? Because so many people would point to the gifts of hope he has offered as the currency for change to happen in their own lives.

To be sure, telling others that "God told us to" can be and has been abused for self-serving purposes. Part of listening to God is learning to ask what God wants me to do even in the little things. But it's also checking it out with others we know that love God, confirming it with what we know in Scripture, until a certain kind of surprise and joy and confidence begins to accompany these little epiphanies along the way.

Have you met Bob Wilson in the news yet? At 90 years old, he gave a \$1000 check to every single student and teacher from Paradise High School—more than a million dollars. Some would say

foolish, sacrificial to be sure. An act of hope that will inspire others to give, if not quite to that magnitude.

At Presbytery a few weeks ago, an invitation was made for churches to adopt a victim of the Camp Fire in Paradise. Afterwards, three of us that were there from this church all converged to say the same thing to each other: Claire Pisor got the words out first: We need to do this... We confirmed for each other God told us to do it. Many others have responded to help take leadership in this as well.

[short video fly-over of Paradise, CA]

This land looks really similar to how Jeremiah predicted his land would look soon once the Babylonians laid siege on the city. There are people nearby living in hopeless situations. It seem foolish to adopt one family two hours away when there are thousands without homes.

But a little boy, this little boy, sat at lunch with his dad, receiving the generous gifts of many of you, and said, "Dad, I think this is the first time I've smiled since the fire." And his dad held back his emotion the best he could. We all did. The truth is, life may actually get more difficult for Colton and his dad, Luke. It may get worse first as the shock wears off and they realize all they've lost, and how long the road will be. An act of hope is to hope in a promise of someday, whenever that day may be.

When Jeremiah was sitting at the table signing papers and weighing out the coins (here's an actual photograph, I'm sure), I can almost hear him thinking: "What am I doing? This is ridiculousness!" He's banking on the promise of God, the same promise that we are preparing for this Advent season.

The hope of a baby in a manger.

Foolish.

Sacrificial.

But restoring our hope in God's promises again.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Jeremiah 33:14-16 again. What questions does this passage bring up for you?
2. If God were speaking through Jeremiah to our world today, which part of this passage would sound the same and which part would sound very different?
3. Let's go back and hear Jeremiah's tone leading up to this prophecy. Read Jeremiah 30:23-31:3. How do you react to or explain the transition between these two chapters?
4. Then in Chapter 32, read verses 2 & 6-7. Why would it seem foolish for God to ask Jeremiah to buy property in the city at this particular time?
5. Why would it also seem ridiculous for the prophet to preach that David's ancestral line would "execute justice in the land"? Since this line seems to have been cut off by the Babylonian exile, what will it take for God to re-establish this prophetic lineage?
6. As we enter Advent and look ahead to 2019, how would you describe "the days that are surely coming"?
7. Can you point to any seemingly foolish acts of hope that are reminders of God's light in this world?
8. What are ways we can offer "foolish acts of sacrificial hope" in this season as a church or as individuals?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What are some things that we do as God's people that might seem silly to others, but are signs of our trust in God's promises?