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Jeremiah 33:14-16; **Luke 21:25-36**

THIS GIFT'S FOR YOU

It's just a bit ironic that the Christmas season, the season of hope, comes at the darkest time of the year. Sometimes we find darkness comforting—like wrapping yourself in a warm blanket. But sometimes the darkness can feel very heavy. And winter's darkness can sometimes exacerbate the internal heaviness we may be carrying within us—all the personal hardships of our lives or the terrible news in the world that can leave us feeling weary with it all.

And then along comes Christmas. And society tells us we are to be hopeful and happy and joyful. I believe that many of us face the season with a good degree of ambivalence. For many of us, the reality of our lives, the reality of the world, does not match all the seasonal hype. Perhaps I am describing you. Perhaps you feel the heaviness of life weigh upon you. Perhaps you have lost a loved one or a job. Maybe you know the pain of a divorce or an estrangement from a family member. Maybe you face a serious illness. And then there are the conditions in our nation or world that can feel so dark and overwhelming. The divisions. The animosity. The tragic stories in the news of death and hatred and prejudice. The all-too frequent accounts when justice is not carried out, when the weak suffer, when the rich or powerful or privileged get off. And we are overcome by how heavy and dark it all is.

For all of us who are weighed down by the realities of our lives and of our world, the prophet Jeremiah comes to us with a gift in hand. He says to us, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill my promise." Jeremiah offered this gift of hope to a community that was in great despair. His people had been dragged off by their captors to live in forced exile in Babylon. There in that foreign land, they were grieved for all they had lost back

home, for the beloved Temple which had been destroyed, for their world which had been torn apart. And these exiles saw no evidence that their suffering would end anytime soon. The entire community was weighed down by despair and darkness.

But then Jeremiah comes along with a word of hope. God had not forgotten them nor was God indifferent to their suffering. Jeremiah offers the people the vision of a day when God would redeem them from their pain. In the midst of all that suffering and grief and sorrow, Jeremiah was sustained by the conviction that the outcome of humanity was in the hands of a loving God, a good God, the God of life.

Jeremiah's words reach all the way across the centuries to us today with the same hope. The days are surely coming, says God. The days are surely coming, when justice and righteousness will be executed in the land. Don't you long for that? I do. That is what the Advent is all about—it's about our longing and yearning for God's justice and righteousness to set things right in our lives and in our world. If that is what you are feeling this Advent, if you are feeling a deep dissonance between how things are and how you know God would want them to be, then rest assured, you are correctly celebrating Advent. That longing is the essence of Advent. Think about the Advent hymns we sing about God coming to set things right: "Come Thou-long Expected Jesus," or "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." They all speak to a deep longing for God to enter our world and execute justice and righteousness.

Jesus speaks about this in our reading from Luke today. But what Jesus has to say isn't entirely comfortable for us. Jesus uses apocalyptic language to speak about God's righteous coming, and apocalyptic language is unsettling for sure. Such language is often used by those who try to predict the end of the world or who try to frighten people with words of judgment. But we will have a better understanding of biblical apocalyptic writings if we think of them as

utterances of faithful people who are at their wits end. Apocalyptic writings in the Bible are written by those filled with despair and pain because of their present reality, and who look heavenward in hope of what God can and will do to set things right. In other words, apocalyptic writings in the Bible are all about hope.

Now, often we think of hope as something warm and fuzzy. Hope is supposed to feel good. And sometimes we misunderstand the activity of having hope as a passive *feeling*, as if all we need do is sit back and wait to see what will happen. But that is not really the biblical understanding of hope.

Jesus speaks about hope in our reading today but his hope comes in a rather strange package. The hope Jesus offers is a blend of both warning and comfort. First let's look at the warning. The hope Jesus offers is not some version of "don't worry, be happy." And he doesn't give us some sentimentalized optimism about the future. Instead, the hope Jesus offers is rooted in facing the hard realities that are present around us. He wants us to see what is really taking place around us so that we will not be fooled by the powers of this world.

His warnings remind me of Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish climate activist who has taken the leaders of the world to task for their failure to act upon the realities of climate change. In one speech Greta Thunberg stated, "Adults keep saying, 'We owe it to young people to give them hope.' But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic . . . I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is."

The hope Jesus delivers comes with a warning. Your house is on fire. Your lives are at stake. The justice and righteousness of God will prevail. So be ready. Be ready so that, like the fig tree he talks about sprouting leaves, you will see the coming of God's righteousness and

justice and be ready to join in whenever and wherever it may break out: some day at the grocery store, or when dealing with a conflict in the family, or when writing a letter to a member of Congress, or when witnessing an act of compassion, or when volunteering in the community. Hope is not rooted in passivity but in a readiness—a readiness to see God’s presence and a readiness to join in God’s activity.

And that brings us to the second element of Jesus’ hope. First Jesus gives us a warning. But he also gives us comfort. Jesus tells his followers not to be weighed down by the worries of this life. Jesus has compassion for the burdens of life we endure, for the worries we experience for ourselves and others, for the heaviness of injustice and evil we experience. Do not be weighed down, he tells us. Why? Because the days are surely coming, the days are surely coming when God will fulfill God’s promises to execute justice and righteousness.

Are you weighed down this Advent? Then you are in luck. Because Jeremiah and Jesus offer us a gift to lift our burdens, a light in the midst of the darkness. God has not forsaken us. God is present with us and active in bringing about the newness of God’s salvation. And in that we have hope. Hope, you see, is not the gift that is appreciated by those who are happy and fulfilled. Hope is only appreciated by those who know the brokenness and pain of life. So, if you are among those who know this, if you are among those who feel weighed down by the brokenness of this world, then this gift is precisely for you.