

Jeremiah 33:14–16 (NRSV)

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. 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. 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 deliverance.”

## The Days Are Surely Coming

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: November 29, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Jerusalem is at her last gasp. Solomon's great temple will soon fall to Nebuchadnezzar. The glory of David's empire has eclipsed. His name is raised in hope that the Lord God will one day restore the efficacy of the lineage, that one day there will be a son of David who will restore the kingdom, a son of David who will be worthy of the title. For three centuries the royal house has degenerated. The throne has been held by king after king, the next worse than the last. And now the little land of Judah is smothered by the Babylonians and the Egyptians. [Slide 1]

Sometimes we think prophets have a crystal ball, that they can look into the ball and see the future. But the Biblical prophets far more often looked at the wall and read the handwriting. The Biblical prophets had no magic powers. They were simply more willing to look the obvious in the face and say it out loud.

Jeremiah was such a prophet. To Jeremiah the map was obvious. The crush of armies on all sides was closing in. And if Judah were to survive it was time to negotiate treaties and face the reality that had been coming for three centuries, the reality that Judah was no longer a military power, the reality that Judah could no longer resist the power of her neighbors. Whatever protection they could expect from Yahweh it was not going to come by the sword.

Jeremiah pleaded with king Zedekiah. Make a treaty with Babylon, he said. To be fair the king Zedekiah was in a hard place. His predecessor had already been marched off to Babylon along with many of the most talented Judean leaders. Zedekiah was in his early twenties, devoid of good advisors and understandably unsure of himself. He would listen to Jeremiah and seem to understand, but then he would consult with his foolhardy cabinet. Don't give up, they said. There's still time. And then when they advised a decision it was a disaster. Make a treaty with Egypt, they said. Egypt doesn't want Judah. The Egyptians can help us beat the Babylonians, and we'll ultimately keep our independence.

Look at the map. Does that look like a good idea to you? But Zedekiah listened to his advisors. You can see the result. [Slide 2] The Babylonian army swooped into Judah. It sent a small contingent that easily repelled the half-hearted Egyptians. And then it crushed Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar didn't even bother to lead the army. He stayed up in Riblah. [Slide 3] The army brought Zedekiah along with his sons to Nebuchadnezzar in Riblah. There Nebuchadnezzar had Zedekiah's sons killed before his eyes. Then he gouged the young king's eyes out and sent him to Babylon where he lived out his days, blind and hand milling grain.

Jeremiah had seen it all coming. The signs had been easy to read. And now the last vestige of David's realm was smoking rubble. [Placeholder Slide] But even when Jeremiah was trying to talk sense to Zedekiah, even when Jeremiah was pretty sure the monarch would ignore him and that disaster would strike, the prophet uttered these remarkable words, "Look, the days are coming"—this is the LORD's declaration—"when I will fulfill the good promises that I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a Righteous Branch to sprout up for David, and He will administer justice and

righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely, and this is what she will be named: Yahweh Our Deliverance.”

If Jeremiah the prophet is good at reading the handwriting on the wall, on what wall does he find this message of hope? Where in the smoldering ruins does Jeremiah read the signs of a bright future?

Well, it has probably not escaped your notice that this is the First Sunday of Advent. This reading from Jeremiah, assigned for the day, strikes a familiar Advent note. The Gospel writers quote such passages to show that the prophets foresaw the coming of Jesus. In the time of Jesus, some seven centuries after Jeremiah, the people are still hungering for the fulfillment of God’s good promise. There will “spring up for David a Righteous Branch,” an ideal leader who will return Jerusalem to safety, who will be righteous. The Gospel writers say that this promise found in the Prophets is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

As Christians we embrace this interpretation. Jesus is the one whom the prophets foretold.

It’s a funny thing about human beings, though. In the time when Jesus was born people were looking for this ideal leader. It’s hard to reliably construct a history of all the groups in those days, but we know that some thought that the kind of leader the prophets spoke of would be the kind of leader who would throw off the yoke of Rome by military might. [Slide 4] If it was misguided to resist the Babylonians seven centuries before, this map makes it clear that militarily resisting Rome was even more foolhardy. Rome controlled brightly colored areas in one way or another by Jesus’ time. If Jeremiah was warning Zedekiah about the dangers of fighting Babylon, it says a lot about human beings that his words were used seven centuries later to advocate military engagement against Rome, to say that this was the way that Judah would be saved and Jerusalem would live in safety.” [Placeholder Slide]

Jeremiah’s words should be fair warning against fighting losing battles. Babylon and Rome were just too big to fail. But was Jeremiah telling the people to just pick their fights more carefully? Was he just a smarter military man than the king of Judah, just more practical or pragmatic? Or was he trying to offer advice that would change things even more dramatically?

The Hebrew of Jeremiah’s words reveal that he was trying to say something more to Zedekiah. Zedekiah in Hebrew means ‘the Lord is my righteousness.’ When Jeremiah predicts the day of deliverance to come he says will be called, “the Lord is our deliverance.” Given the Hebrew Bible’s almost constant attention to word play it is inconceivable that Jeremiah is not drawing an intentional contrast. Jeremiah is saying, “Hey, Zedekiah, ‘the Lord is my deliverance’, one day we will be living in the time of true deliverance when Jerusalem is called ‘the Lord is our deliverance’. The true deliverance will be our deliverance, not just yours.

I suppose it’s a subtle difference, but it makes all the difference in the world. When Israel opted to be ruled by kings, almost immediately the people became secondary. The king would have great power, and very often the king made decisions based on personal desires and flaws to the detriment of the people and the nation. David stole the wife of one of his loyal soldiers and then had him murdered to cover his tracks. From its earliest beginnings God had promised ancient Israel a land of good and plenty, the Promised Land, where they would become a great nation as numerous as the sand of the sea or the stars of the sky. In this land they were to flourish and to open their arms to the stranger and the sojourner, for they, too, had known the hard life of strangers and sojourners. The Lord was to be their God in a broad and inclusive sense. But kings like Zedekiah understood God to be their God in a quite individual way. The king and the Lord conversed. They were the leaders of heaven and earth. But God never intended it that way, for

God knew that individuals with that kind of power would soon fall to their own vices, and worse they would soon fall to their own delusions of grandeur.

But Jeremiah was among those who began to see a different handwriting on the wall. The words he read didn't just warn Zedekiah of stronger enemies. The words he read called into question the idea of the king's God, the king's land and the king's people. Jeremiah began to read the wall and see a bigger God, a God who spoke inclusively, not of the king's land but our land, not of the king's people but our people, not of the king's God but our God.

Jeremiah writes elsewhere that this is a new covenant written on the human heart. It will be within the people. They will be guided by this internal compass.

In many ways it's very difficult to map ancient texts and societies onto our lives today. For example, in the U.S. we have a democracy, and God knows that even a democracy can fall to myopic self-interest and self-delusion. But there is something in Jeremiah's contrasting 'my' with 'our'. There is something broadening and opening there that corresponds to having the very will of God inscribed on our hearts. It calls for a greater inclusivity. Jeremiah was aware that holding God or power or land too narrowly would lead to calamity, but that holding them in a broader sense as ours would open the doors for human flourishing, maybe to the extent of the sands in the sea or the stars in the sky. Here the ancient text still speaks. Look, the days are coming says the Lord, the days when what divides us will no longer be, and we will call in one voice, one people, to a God, our God, who has written words onto our hearts, words foreseen by Jeremiah and words brought to life in Jesus of Nazareth, nothing less than the words of life. Amen.