

Jeremiah 33:14-16
December 2, 2018

“Advent Hope”

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Tuesday, I attended a program at UCC related Lakeland University in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin. The Rev. John Thomas, former General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, engaged a group of clergy on the topic: Preaching in Angry Times. From arguments on social media to topics we knew better than to bring up at the Thanksgiving table; we all know we live in angry times.

We get angry about whether Climate change is real or not, and if so what is causing it? We get angry about how our nation can respond with compassion and uphold security in the face of immigration issues. We even get heated about whether or not Milwaukee should have built a streetcar? We feel passionate about these and other topics and when a friend or family member disagrees with us, it can escalate.

Rev. Thomas provided some helpful guidance for self-care in these times, asking us to wrestle with questions like; how do I deal with my own anger in these times? Do I start my day by engaging or avoiding triggers? Where am I grounded; scripture, prayer, or social media and the news? Am I thoughtful and careful about social media engagements? Do I have a healthy rhythm which includes many things that give me life and nurture joy? Rev. Thomas told the story that he once asked a young person if they had any instructions for old people on Social Media, the young person said, “you can not go on there until you know who you are!” We know our communities, nations and world face real problems but we utterly disagree on how to solve them.

So what were the times like back in Jeremiah’s day? Professor Kathleen O’Conner describes exile in these words, “The people had been taken captive, dragged from their land, deprived of their temple. They were beaten, imprisoned, and faced genocide.” They were angry and in a state of despair, they could no longer imagine God’s righteous future.”

It was a wilderness of sorts with the people experiencing abandonment, anger, sorrow and grief. It begins to sound a little like pictures we see today. Right? Pictures of crumbling family farms. Empty store fronts all along the main streets of our small towns. The opioid crises killing our children. Empty marriages. Being Widowed. Losing relationships. Still facing financial concerns. We simply don’t have the world as it should be, and this causes deep pain within us.

In this situation we will sit here again through the four Sundays of advent. We will see the royal blue colors of the banners and paraments up front. We will light a new candle on the wreath each Sunday and proclaim that in God we have hope for the future.

Right here, in the middle of real sorrow and fear; fires close in on more homes in California, children search for food in the rubbish of the streets of Yemen, Vietnam floods, our nation faces tremendous challenges. Right here we remember how Jeremiah’s words of promised

hope were spoken in a real, concrete world—Germans call this our *sitz en laben*, our specific setting in place and time. God’s promised hope traverses time and appears as a small green branch bringing healing salve for pain, brokenness, anxiety, and injustice; Jeremiah dares to imagine this world as a world of peace and righteousness, community and hope. This is what the prophets do.

I learned something I thought was interesting this week about the deep blue colors we use in worship during the season of advent. I was always taught that the Deep blue this time of year was a, “Royal Blue,” and they were a sign of the “Mighty King” whose birth we are about to celebrate. But at Lakeland this week I discovered another meaning for the Deep Blue during advent; it is the color of dawn just as it is barely starting to break forth each morning. So when the prophet says, “The Days are Surely Coming,” I picture that beautiful blue at the start of another day, a day filled with possibility, with life, with hope.

Jeremiah dares to paint a picture of God’s world as it should be; hope, peace and righteousness. There is an unavoidable confidence in his words, “the DAYS – ARE – SURELY-COMING... The Lord is our righteousness.” We worship a God who turned a child born in difficult conditions into a savior. A man crucified in a violent and unjust death, emerges three days later from an empty tomb and is so alive that his followers inflate with life. The green sprout emerges from the branch, the blue light breaks forth.

“The days are surely coming,” means God’s promise will be - is being - fulfilled. The poem “An Old Story” by poet laureate Tracy K. Smith speak to me this morning. “We were made to understand it would be terrible. Every small want, every niggling urge, every hate swollen to a kind of epic wind.

Livid, the land, and ravaged, like a rageful dream. The worst of us having taken over and broken the rest utterly down.

A long age passed. When at last we knew how little would survive us—how little we had mended -- or built that was not now lost—something large and old awoke. And then our singing brought on a different manner of weather. Then animals long believed gone crept down from trees. We took new stock of one another. We wept to be reminded of such color.”

We are yearning, hungering to be reminded of Such Color as would bring tears of joy. We long for a righteous branch to spring up. The story of this season teaches us, we may not know where, or when, or how hope will be born in the land, but we know the days are surely coming and, probably will appear where we are least likely to expect them.

Amen.

****Thanks to Rev. John Thomas for some of the ideas and images included in this sermon***