***JEREMIAH’S SONG: IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Jeremiah 33:10-16 and Luke 21:25-28

*In the Bleak Midwinter* is, for some, a much-loved Christmas carol, though I doubt it is often sung in Hawaii or Southern California or even Memphis where the winters are a lot less bleak and the frosty wind never moans. The wintery picture the song paints for that first Christmas might be more appropriate for England or New England than the Middle East, but it well describes the bleak attitude and outlook for Israel in the days of Jeremiah. His prophecies of doom and gloom had come to pass, and the people found themselves living in exile with little hope on the horizon. The promises of God seemed broken beyond repair – the land and temple lay in ruins, the best and brightest of the people had been carried off to foreign lands, the throne of Israel promised to David and his heirs was empty. It was not only the land that was a wasteland, so too was the nation, their faith, their hopes, and their dreams. God had abandoned them because they had abandoned God. Jerusalem at that time might have been called a City of Sorrows or perhaps just the City of a Never-ending Bleak Midwinter.

2500 years later Jerusalem is still a city mired in conflict in a region beset by the threat of violence on all sides. It is a city divided by walls both literal and figurative with little hope of any peaceful resolution on the horizon. I wonder how Christians in Jerusalem or among the Palestinians in Gaza read these words of Jeremiah today. Do they identify with the desolation? Do Syrian refugees see themselves standing among the exiles to whom Jeremiah wrote? Do the victims of California fires and South Carolina floods identify with their sense of loss? This week the CDC reported that the average lifespan of Americans fell for the third year in a row, mainly as a result of dramatic increases in suicide and opioid overdoses; that statistic is rooted in the kind of despair that gripped the people of Israel in Jeremiah’s day, the kind of despair that seeks a release from the bleak reality of living. Do you, in whatever circumstance you find yourself, wonder where God is amid the tempests and tragedies and turmoil and suicides and overdoses that rock our world? Then hear these words of Jeremiah, first spoken to Judean exiles:

*Thus says the Lord, there shall once again be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing the Lord’s praise and bring offerings. There will again be green pastures in which to graze and still waters to restore your soul and cups that overflow.*

The picture Jeremiah paints for the exiles is better and brighter than they dared imagine. It offered the prospect of a new day, a day beyond the valley of the shadow of death, a day beyond the hopelessness of the present, a day of promises fulfilled and hopes restored, a day of peace like a river and joy like a fountain and love overflowing. It was the promise of a future, the promise of restored community in which joy filled the streets, the promise of peace and economic prosperity in which it was once again safe to invest in flocks and tend them. It was a promise that was realized for the exiles in their return to Jerusalem.

We who stand far removed from those exiles look back to that promise fulfilled for them, but we also look forward to that promise fulfilled for us in the day of the Lord’s return. We stand here on the cusp of Advent not only looking back to what God has done, but also looking forward to what God will yet do. In Advent we prepare to celebrate the birth in Bethlehem of that righteous Branch springing up for David of which Jeremiah spoke, and we look forward to the promised day of Jesus’ return in glory. In Jeremiah’s prophecy we hear not only good news for Judah’s exiles, but tidings of great joy for all people with echoes of Handel’s *Messiah* announcing his name: *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* In Jeremiah’s prophecy we see the thread of divine grace weaving its way through history to a stable in Bethlehem, for we recognize the One who saves God’s people and restores our broken relationship with God, the One who is named by God “Jesus”, “Jeshua”, “the Lord saves.” Jeremiah knew nothing of that child when he spoke the word of the Lord given to him; he didn’t know that his words would offer hope, not only to Judah’s exiles, but to all those exiled from God in whatever place in whatever generation. But the Lord knew, for the days are surely coming, says the Lord!

Amid all the pain and turmoil in the world today, we have reason to hope for a new and better day, for our hope is grounded in God’s sure promises. It is hope that Jesus says should cause us to stand tall in these tumultuous days, and in the midst of turmoil in the last days. No one knows when those last days will come – they will come like a thief in the night, says Jesus – but when they do come, we need not fear them for we recognize that our redemption, not our destruction, is drawing near.

In his book *Have a Little Faith* Mitch Albom recalls a story told by Rabbi Albert Lewis in a sermon some years ago:

*A man seeking employment on a farm hands his letter of recommendation to his prospective employer. It reads simply, “He sleeps in a storm.” The owner is desperate for help, so he hires the man. Several weeks pass, and suddenly, in the middle of the night, a powerful storm rips through the valley. Awakened by the swirling rain and howling wind, the owner leaps out of bed. He calls for his new hired hand, but the man is sleeping soundly. So he dashes off to the barn. He sees, to his amazement, that the animals are secure with plenty of feed. He runs out to the field. He sees the bales of wheat have been bound and are wrapped in tarpaulins. He races to the silo. The doors are latched, and the grain is dry. And then he understands, “He sleeps in a storm.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

He sleeps because he has prepared; he has done his part. He rests secure. There will be signs in the skies and distress among the nations and fear and foreboding among the people upon the coming of the Son of Man, says Jesus. “Now when these things take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Rest secure! Be at peace in the midst of the storm, because you trust in the God who rules over all. Be at peace because you have not wasted this time of waiting for the last days to come, but have been preparing for his coming. How shall we prepare?

By loving and serving God and our neighbors,

by doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God,

by seeking to be faithful day by day.

Be at peace but be alert. Be at peace but be prepared. Be at peace but be faithful while you wait for the day of the Lord. Look for that day

not idly but faithfully,

not fearfully but hopefully,

not with hands wrung in worry but with hands open to serve, so that justice may cascade like waters and righteousness like an ever- flowing stream.

If you would welcome this new day of the Lord, then do so with a commitment to fight injustice globally and locally now, to pursue righteousness in relationship with God and your neighbors now, to live into that new name given to Jerusalem for that new day: *Adonai (YHWH )Zedakanuh:* *The Lord is our righteousness!* It is not only the new name for Jerusalem on that day; it is a new name for all God’s people. It is a new name for a new day that is marked for us by a new face – the face of a child born in a stable who was and is Emmanuel, God with us. He is the one who came to restore us to right relationship with God, and he holds out hope for Jerusalem and for all humanity, hope that we might yet live into that new name together in joy and in peace. He offers an alternative to those who would turn to opioids or suicide to escape the world, an alternative rooted in love, rooted in divine purpose, rooted in hope, rooted in peace, rooted in him.

In the closing stanza of *In the Bleak Midwinter* this question is raised with respect to this holy child:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?*

The writer, Christina Rosetti, suggests:

*If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb*

*If I were a wise man, I would do my part*

*Yet what I can I give him: give my heart.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

That is what we have to give – our hearts, our hands, our very lives!And what he gives us is hope and life and peace – not just for some future day, but for today! Adonai (*YHWH) Zedakanuh*! The Lord is our righteousness! That is Jeremiah’s hope-filled song, our hope-filled name, and God’s hope-filled promise – for this first Sunday in Advent, for bleak midwinter days to come, and for all our days! Amen

1. Mitch Albom, *Have a Little Faith*, Hyperion: New York, 2009, p.93 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *In the Bleak Midwinter*, Christina Rossetti, c.1872 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)