

A Righteous Longing

Advent 1; Series C

Jeremiah 33:14-16

I suspect that all of us have some degree of longing for justice and righteousness in the world. We long for people to be at peace with one another. And so we say, “Can’t we all just get along?” This is why the phrases “peace on earth” and “peace in the Middle East” have become commonplace. We long for criminals and tyrants, both domestic and foreign, to have their day in court. Social inequalities disturb us and social injustice disgusts us.

I suspect that all of us, to some degree or another, even act on this longing for justice and righteousness in the world. This is why many of us donate to food banks and give to organizations like toys-for-tots around Christmas time. I suspect that this is why when we enter and exit grocery and department stores around this time of year, we search our pockets for loose change to drop in the red receptacle resting next to the Salvation Army bell ringer. A longing for justice and righteousness in the world may find its most common expression in our lives through charitable donations.

The prophet Jeremiah writes in the 6th century BC to a people longing for justice and righteousness. Jeremiah’s audience is the people of Judah, the southern kingdom of the nation of Israel. Jeremiah addresses this kingdom and its capital city, Jerusalem. He tells them that their thirst for justice and righteousness will be quenched—“the days are coming,” he says.

Justice and righteousness in the Bible are relational concepts. They have to do with our relationship with one another and with God. Many times these words occur together as a pair and are interchangeable. Interwoven in the pages of the Bible is this sense of communal justice of a people within a community of God. Legal cases were decided by this unwritten law and sense of justice. And God’s love always provides the context for it. God’s love brings social health and order in communities and in the lives of individuals—justice and righteousness (*Dictionary of the OT Pentateuch*, 225-6).

In the OT, the king was the agent used by God and responsible for bringing this justice and righteousness within the community. There was no formal king for Israel in the time recorded from the books of Genesis through Ruth. God was their king and he temporarily rose up individuals like those in the book of Judges to execute justice and righteousness for his people. It wasn’t until the book of 1 Samuel, chapter 8, that God finally gave into Israel’s demand for a king and longing to be like other nations.

In the days of the Israelite monarchy, the king was responsible for executing justice and righteousness. Some kings did it well. Others did it very poorly. None did it perfectly. And so the people are left longing. And the Lord hears their longing for justice and righteousness and he declares through the prophet Jeremiah, “The days are coming.”

Jeremiah calls these days the days of fulfillment. These are the days when the Lord will fulfill his promise to Israel. This word, promise, is actually the English translation of two Hebrew words that literally make the English phrase, “good word.” We might just go ahead and say, “good news,” the “gospel.” Jeremiah speaks of “good news,” “gospel” days that are coming for Judah and Jerusalem. The Lord fills those days with “justice” and “righteousness.”

Who better to be God's agent to execute this "righteousness" and "justice" than a king? But Jeremiah gives this king a name, "the Righteous Branch." And in the "good news" days this "Righteous Branch" will live up to his name and bring God's justice and righteousness into the world like a good king is supposed to do. He will create an environment of safety and security—"Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely" (Jer 33:16). This king, "the Righteous Branch," establishes a righteous kingdom on earth and he even calls people to belong to it as loyal citizens. The citizens of this righteous kingdom bear the name of "the Righteous Branch" and receive his identity. They shall be called "the Lord is our righteousness" (Jer 33:16).

The question for us today as we reflect on these three short verses from the prophet Jeremiah is the same question that Jeremiah's hearers had in the 6th century BC. They, like you and I, longed for justice and righteousness in the world. And so they, like you and I, wanted to know, "Who is this king, the one called 'Righteous Branch?'"

The prophet Isaiah speaks 150 years before Jeremiah, in the 8th century BC. He gives us a well-known Christmas message in his 11th chapter of the *shoot from the stump of Jesse, a branch* that bears fruit. The Spirit of the Lord is upon this *branch* (11:2). With *righteousness this branch judges* (11:4). *Righteousness* is the belt of his waist (11:5). This *Righteous Branch* brings a *kingdom of peace* (11:6-8).

The prophet Zechariah writes around 100 yrs after Jeremiah in the 5th century BC. He speaks of a king who brings righteousness and salvation for Judah and Jerusalem: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of *Jerusalem!* Behold your *king* is coming to you; *righteous and having salvation* is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zech 9:9).

The Evangelist Luke brings the words of these prophets together as he proclaims that the "good news" days have arrived! "And when he had said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem . . . He sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat . . . And as he rode along, they spread cloaks on the road . . . The whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest" (Lk 19:28-40).

The prophets spoke and we hear their voices and confess *today, in this time and place*, Our Lord Jesus Christ is the righteous branch for David, the shoot from Jesse's stump. He has come riding on a colt into the city of Jerusalem to bring God's righteousness, justice, salvation, and peace for her.

Right now, we, the people of God, are beginning a new church year. We begin with the season of Advent. The word, "Advent," is Latin for "coming." We are in the beginning of a season of *longing for the coming king*. We are longing for the birth of the Christ child. But do we connect our longing for justice and righteousness in this world with our longing for this Christ child? Are we longing for and waiting to celebrate anew the birth of God, our King, who has come for us in order to usher in his kingdom of eternal justice, righteousness, and peace with him?

I suspect that through our Advent and Christmas preparations, it is very enticing for us to make this Christ, who is our king, quench a different thirst. And in our enthusiasm to satisfy that other longing, we might just make the season or the

day about a longing or a thirst that is peripheral and not our Lord's main concern for us. A mother may have a longing for the family just to be together and get along for the holidays. And so the "good news" day spoken by the prophets of old becomes about that longing. A father, who had to drag the Christmas tree and the decorations down from storage, taking precious time that could have been spent watching football, may just long for the "good news" day to be over. A child, who only connects this time of year with getting a whole lot of new stuff, may miss altogether the meaning of the "good news" day and the identity of the one it is about. And what is the danger of preparing for a different longing to be satisfied? The danger is that we are *still left longing and thirsting* for the thing that this *branch*, who is our *king*, has come to bring—justice and righteousness!

This King and his kingdom is not like worldly kings and kingdoms. He doesn't rule the way the world expects of a king. He acts in ways that are often opposite to the way and thinking of the world. He rides into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey with a rag-tag entourage. He acts in ways that seem foolish. He brings justice into the world by sacrificing himself and quenching God's just wrath and anger over sin. He sheds his blood as the righteous one for an unrighteous world. But in doing so he makes it possible for a world to be declared righteous before the very God that they have sinned against. He brings peace between God and man that surpasses all human understanding. Through his glorious resurrection to new life, this righteous king shows that the very enemies of the kingdom of God, sin, death, hell, and the devil, have no power to eternally separate God from his creation.

This king executes his justice and righteousness for you personally by giving to you all of his kingly work in your baptism. In your baptism he gives you his name and identity—"The Lord is your righteousness." Even now as you live in your baptism, you live as a loyal subject of the "Righteous Branch." The Apostle Paul talks about this identity transfer when he speaks of Baptism. He says that you are baptized "in Christ." Therefore, you have a new name, and a new identity. You are a "Christian." Even in a world soaked with injustice and saturated with unrighteousness, you dwell safely and securely in the kingdom of your righteous king. You now have the privilege of honoring this king and his kingdom with your whole life.

God in Christ has inaugurated his kingly work of executing righteousness and justice that you so long for in this world. He brought his justice and righteousness to you and executed it for you in your baptism. It may not be in the way you expect and it may seem like foolishness to the world around us. But God in Christ is your king who has come to you, "righteous and having salvation." And the "good-news days are coming" when he will come again to bring to full completion the work that he has started. You have his word on it. Amen.