November 28, 2021 Advent 1
Jeremiah 33:14-16 Pastor Jeff Laustsen

"Is There Any Hope?"

"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."

Is there any hope?

People usually do not get emotionally upset when a kitchen appliance dies, but Grandma Brown's old stove was no ordinary appliance. It was one of the first electric stoves manufactured and was installed in the Brown family farmhouse to replace the wood stove that had cooked generations of meals. In a time of "planned obsolescence", when many appliances seem to break down on a predetermined schedule, the Brown family stove had been unfailingly reliable for decades, cooking numerous meals and standing as a fixture in its corner of the kitchen. Other appliances came and went, but everyone assumed that the old stove would survive forever. That is why everyone was shocked when one day Grandma turned on the oven to cook a roast – and nothing happened. She tried the circuit breakers, but they were fine; she moved the stove aside to make sure the cord was not frayed or not fully in the plug, but they were fine as well. In desperation, she called her son Rick on the neighbouring farm, but he also could not figure out what was wrong with the stove. Soon the rest of the family gathered in the kitchen in what was rapidly becoming a wake for a beloved family member who everyone feared would soon be gone from their sight. Someone suggested that they call an appliance repair person, but they had already been told that parts were no longer being made for such an old appliance. Another family member tried to brighten the mood by suggesting that a new appliance, with all the latest features, would be a wonderful addition to the kitchen, but this seemed like heresy to speak of replacing the stove while it was still in the room. Finally, Cousin Bob spoke: "Why don't we call Old Dan?" Old Dan Parker was a well-known handyman, a "Mr. Fix-It" who seemed to have the knack for repairing anything that others would fail in fixing. A call was made, and soon Old Dan came into the kitchen, looked at the stove, and then got on the phone and called the local junk yard. In twenty minutes, an old truck pulled up to the back door, and Dave the junkman brought in an old part that he pulled from a stove in his yard. In a matter of minutes, Old Dan had the old stove up and running, and everyone rejoiced that hope had been restored in what appeared to be a hopeless situation.

Is there any hope?

There are many times when we may face a situation where there appears to be no hope of repair, or healing, or reconciliation. It may be a beloved item that can no longer be fixed, or a disease that cannot be treated, or a relationship that appears to be beyond repair. It may be our reaction to a world that appears to be spinning out of control, of news that brings reports of wars and conflicts, violence and hatred. It may be the fatigue that we are experiencing in the seemingly endless COVID-19 pandemic, where positive signs of progress are quickly dashed by new outbreaks and renewed restrictions. For people of faith, it may be our despair over the future of the church and how we will survive not only the pandemic but a society that increasing appears to be turning its back on the church and the faith it proclaims. We may find ourselves crying out in despair: ***Is there any hope?***

These words of hopelessness and despair are met on this day when we enter a season whose central message is hope. Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of our Lord, both our annual celebration of the coming of Christ at Christmas and our faith that looks forward to that day when our Lord and Saviour will *"come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end."* (Nicene Creed). Advent was originally a penitential season that was modelled after Lent, a time of repentance and renewal as we prepared for the major festival of the Nativity of our Lord; Advent shared the colour purple with Lent as a sign of the solemnity of the season (the one exception being the Third Sunday of Advent, known as "Gaudete Sunday," from the Latin word "to rejoice," a pause from the penitential spirit of Advent symbolized by the pink candle on the Advent wreath). In recent years, the emphasis in Advent has shifted so that it is a unique season whose central message is hope, symbolized by the blue candles on the wreaths that have their origins in the German Lutheran churches in the 16th Century. As we engage in our busy Christmas preparations, Advent calls us to heed the words of John the Baptist to *"prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."* (Luke 3:4).

The first words that are proclaimed to us on this First Sunday of Advent are from the prophet Jeremiah, a major prophet of the Old Testament whose ministry spanned both the religious reform of King Josiah in 622 B.C, and the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah in 587 B.C. While his career was among the longest of Biblical prophets, it was a ministry that was filled with challenges and defeats, as Jeremiah would often despair over the people's failure to heed the word of the Lord that he proclaimed to them and return in repentance to the God of their salvation:

- "The anguish of the prophet over the heedlessness of the people overlaps the anguish of God. Jeremiah's laments provide a glimpse into the inner struggle of those figures who were called by God to an often demanding and, indeed, terrible task." – Patrick D. Miller.

The call of Jeremiah came at an early age; the Lord proclaimed to him that *"before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* (Jeremiah 1:4). When the young boy objects that *"truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy,"* the Lord assures him that *"you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."* (1:6-8). As a prophet of the Lord, Jeremiah is sent to call the people to repentance, to turn from their sinful and rebellious ways and return to the Lord who is" gracious *and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."* (Joel 2:13).

- "Return, faithless Israel, says the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD; I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against the LORD your God, and scattered your favours among strangers under every green tree, and have not obeyed my voice, says the LORD. Return, O faithless children, says the LORD, for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion." – 3:12-14.

But despite the graciousness of this call to repentance, Jeremiah's words would ignored again and again, to the point where this person of faith would cry out in despair over the people's failure to heed the Word of the Lord to turn around from the path of destruction in which they were travelling:

- "O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For wherever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!' For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long." – 20:7-8.

It will become Jeremiah's lot to witness the destruction of his nation at the hands of the Babylonians, the conquest of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jewish people. Yet while Jeremiah's words are often filled with lament and despair, his book is also filled with hope that shines forth in even the darkest moments:

- "Hidden within these desperate events is God's abiding faithfulness to Israel. Indeed, God is already preparing to raise up a 'righteous branch,' a descendant of David, and Jerusalem and Judah will be restored." – Margaret Odell.

This hope can be heard in God's message of judgment upon the faithless kings who have not properly cared for God's people. The kings of Israel and Judah were placed in the role of shepherds who watched over the Lord's flock, protected them, kept them together and in order, and made sure to take care of any who were hurt. But the kings have failed to be good and faithful shepherds, and the Lord now proclaims judgment upon them for failing to live up to the trust that was placed in their hands:

- "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Says the LORD. Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: it is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD." – 23:1-2.

This word of judgment against the faithless shepherds is followed by the promise that the Lord will act as a good shepherd who *"will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply."* (23:3). God will then provide good shepherds who will faithfully lead God's people so that *"they shall fear no longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD"* (23:4). To a defeated and exiled people who may be crying out *"is there any hope?"* the Word of God speaks a message of light amid darkness and hope amid despair:

- "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called, 'The LORD is our righteousness.'" – 23:5-6.

The people of God need no longer fear or be dismayed because of their sure and certain hope in the future into which the Lord is guiding them. The Lord reinforces the covenant promise made to David that *"I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever"* (2 Samuel 7:12) by declaring the divine intention to place a different descendant of David on the throne. The primary characteristic of his reign will be righteousness that manifests the Lord's way with the people; *"righteousness is that*

all-encompassing notion of the proper relationship among God and people and king." (Miller).

These words of hope that are rooted in the good news that *"the days are surely coming, says the LORD"* (33:14) are again proclaimed in today's first lesson, where the prophet focuses on the leadership of the future, especially the royal priestly leadership of David and the Levites. The Lord will lift up leaders who will rightly render the affairs of the people and will lead them in their worship of the Lord. The very name of this ruler – *"the LORD is our righteousness"* – identifies a shepherd sent by God who will come and rule righteously. The character of this rule is clear and consistent: it is exercised in the maintenance of the right, in keeping faithful to relationships, and in upholding the right of the wronged.

- "A human community that goes by the name 'the LORD is our righteousness' understands itself to be delivered, redeemed, and cared for by the Lord. That community understands itself to be committed to all the ways God has defined as right living in relationship to God and neighbour." – Miller.

The divine promises proclaimed by Jeremiah are meant to keep God's people from translating the vision of hope into a purely other-worldly system that has no concrete connections with lived experience. They join with other Old Testament voices to announce a future that centers around the restoration of this world to its proper character as God's creation.

- "A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD … The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." – Isaiah 11:1-2, 6.

The words of Jeremiah express a message of hope for the eventual restoration of God's people to their own land; this message of return and restoration provide the essential content of the prophetic message of hope that is rooted in the confident assurance that *"the days are **surely** coming."* This certainty is rooted in the hope that is ours in God's promises, which are unlike hope that is rooted in human promises that may or may not come to fruition. The hope that is at the center of the Christian faith is rooted in the faithfulness of God, whose steadfast love endures forever and whose promises are always fulfilled. It is the hope that *"does not disappoint us,*

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:5). It is a hope that is rooted in our assurance that *"neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38-39). It is the hope that is at the foundation of the Church which is the Body of Christ: *"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."* (Ephesians 4:4). We are a people who *"by his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"* (1 Peter 1:3), and therefore hope needs to be at the heart of our life and mission as people who place their trust in the certainty of God's Holy Word and the blessed hope that is ours in Jesus Christ:

- "While we live on earth we must live in hope. For although we know that through faith we possess all the riches of God (for faith certainly brings with it the new birth and inheritance), we do not yet see them. Therefore we still stand in hope, and are laid aside a little while, so that we cannot see them with our eyes. This he calls the hope of life." – Martin Luther, 1523.

Is there any hope?

There are many reasons for people to despair of our present circumstances and to question whether there are any grounds for hope in the future, whether we can look to brighter days ahead or to accept the darkness in which we dwell as our sad but inevitable lot. We may wonder if our children will live in a world that is able to sustain life, in nations and communities in which safety and mutual respect may be found, or in a church that will once again fulfill our Lord's commission to be a holy people called to love God and serve one another. Experience has taught us that hope that is rooted in human experience or institutions is fleeting; but our experience of God's presence and God's blessings gives us the confidence to look to the future in the comfort of a holy and certain hope that is rooted in the good news that *"neither death nor life shall sever from the Lord his children ever."*

- "We are not asked to manufacture strength, invent courage, concoct hope out of thin air, improvise a whole new outlook on life. This is not a self-help course, or ten steps toward positive living. It's grace. It's gospel. God is already 'there' for you – *is* your 'light and salvation,' *is* the 'stronghold of your

> life,' is committed to you and will not forsake you." – Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?*

Yes, there is hope, because we know that Christ was born of Mary in that "little town of Bethlehem" so that *"the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."* There is hope, because in the birth of Jesus the promise of the Lord is fulfilled that in him is *Emmanuel,* "God with us." There is hope – not a hope that is rooted in human experience or wishful thinking, but hope that is grounded in the Word of God which is trustworthy and true, the Word of the coming of our Lord that is the message of "amazing grace" that in the coming of Christ is our blessed hope that *"grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."*

Yes, there is hope, for Christ is coming!

Amen.