

Are We There Yet?

Jeremiah 33:14-16 CEB The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. ¹⁶ In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The LORD Is Our Righteousness.

1Thessalonians 3:9-1 CEB How can we thank God enough for you, given all the joy we have because of you before our God? ¹⁰ Night and day, we pray more than ever to see all of you in person and to complete whatever you still need for your faith. ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself guide us on our way back to you. ¹² May the Lord cause you to increase and enrich your love for each other and for everyone in the same way as we also love you. ¹³ May the love cause your hearts to be strengthened, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his people. Amen.

Are We There Yet?

If you've ever taken an auto trip with small children in the back seat, you're familiar with the classic question, "Are we there yet?" The implication is, "Why not?" We think of this as a young child's kind of question. The general opinion of experienced parents is that as children get older, their understanding of time and distance increases and they grow out of asking "Are we there yet?" As I've studied today's passage from Jeremiah, I've begun to realize that we adults never outgrow the urge to ask, "Are we there yet?"

In these weeks before Christmas our society, our culture, encourages us to dream of a holiday experience that's filled with tradition and sentiment. We dream of a white Christmas with beautiful young people playing in the snow in their new winter coats. We picture dinners and parties with a crowd of friends and family dressed in new holiday outfits enjoying a rich feast at an elegant table in a sumptuously decorated house. And couples express their deep love for one another by one surprising the other with a new car with a big red bow in the driveway. In short, we're told that consumerism will fulfill us.

There are some people, such as us gathered here this morning, who seek, as Charles Dickens put it, to give Christmastime "the veneration due its sacred name and origin." As we begin to move through the season of Advent, the proposed scriptures include passages from the prophets. This isn't so that we will hear stories about once upon a time in the past. Instead, we're presented with themes that are developed over time and carried into the future.

Jeremiah and his neighbors in Judah knew that the enemy was coming. They knew that they would be conquered and many would be enslaved, many would be carried away into captivity. Their grandfathers and ancestors told them that this land was given to them by God. Now, they were about to lose their land and their freedom. Where was their God? Even as the world that they knew was crumbling down around them, Jeremiah challenged his people to see God's future, even as difficult as that might be in their current circumstances. Later, as they lived in exile and captivity, this text in Jeremiah was meant to be comforting and a source of hope to those people.

How might the former resident of Jerusalem, now a captive in Babylon, have understood these words from Jeremiah? A common theme in Jeremiah's writings is that the kings of Israel and Judah had been self-promoting, and violent, and they had exploited the people. As a result, the nation had been conquered and now God's people were in exile. This text announced God's intention for the future, when friendly systems of government would be established that rightly cared for the affairs of the people. The people could look forward to a time when the kings (the branch of David's line) would promote justice and righteousness. The captive in Babylon might have said, "Are we there yet? No. But the day is coming!"

As Christians, Jeremiah's words mean something different to us. We know that Jesus was a descendant of King David and so we take the phrase, "righteous branch from David's line" and we capitalize the word "branch" and hear this passage as being about Jesus. Someone today could read this text from Jeremiah and ask, "Are we there yet? Has this promise of God come to fulfillment?" Many would be quick to say "Yes! Advent prepares us and pushes us along until Jesus, the son of David is born. Christ the king rules in righteousness. Are we there yet? Absolutely!"

But there's a difficulty with declaring that this passage of scripture has come to pass, that we have arrived, so to speak. Verse sixteen says that "in those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely." The birth, life, and death of Jesus, and his resurrection as the Christ of faith have not made Jerusalem and Judah safe and secure. In fact, at no time since the time of Jeremiah has Judah been "saved" and at no time has Jerusalem "dwelled securely."

John Calvin acknowledged that these promises of God seemed to just disappear. How can this be? Are the promises of God broken or forgotten? Has God reneged? We have this tendency to view God's declarations with no thought to our possible involvement in the process. Sometimes we can be like a child who is told by their parents, "We've saved and put aside the funds for your college education. Your degree at Harvard is completely paid for." Having been told that college is guaranteed, the child slacks off on her studies, the grades slip, some irresponsible behavior takes place, the legal system takes notice, and the young adult enters, not Harvard, but the school of hard knocks. Then that young adult is likely to cry out, "But you promised that I'd go to Harvard!" Sometimes that's the way we treat God's visions for our future. We ignore our involvement. We overlook the ways that we obstruct, delay, and sideline the plans God has for us. We still act like the children in the back seat of the car, impatiently asking, "Are we there yet?"

Our free will, our beloved independence, enables us to wander off in some frivolous direction. We can decide to be short-sighted and focus entirely on our immediate life, the little pleasures and distractions that are immediately at hand. Time passes and then we glance up one day, look around, and ask, "Are we there yet?" We look at life like a little child, sitting in the back seat, expecting to be taken somewhere without any active participation on our part. And we feel like God has failed us when we realize that we aren't there yet. The promise in Jeremiah was for leadership that "will do what is just and right in the land." We expect the land to be saved and the city to be safe. Instead we're buffeted by turmoil, uncertainty, danger, and threats. "You promised, God! Why aren't we there, yet?"

Patience is a virtue and with faith and patience, we can still look forward to the fulfillment of God's vision. There is importance in waiting, anticipating, and trusting in a promised future that seems very different and distant from our present situation. Because we know about God's care for us in the past, we can imagine God's good care and fulfillment of promises in the future.

We are called not only to point out suffering and injustice, but also to lean forward into this alternate future that God has promised. We aren't passive passengers on the trip of life. We're called to actively participate in this journey into the future. This passage in Jeremiah insists that life in covenant with God is characterized by justice and righteousness. Righteousness is not an attitude or a belief. It's action that's in alignment with God's purposes. It is doing as opposed to being. Don't confuse self-righteousness with true righteousness. Self-righteousness is an inflated ego that comes from self approval. Righteousness is a humble process of living with and for others in just and loving relationships.

This passage in Jeremiah isn't a vision of something that's completed at the end of Advent. Christians who observe Advent aren't holding a countdown to Christmas and the end of the year, but are looking forward into the future that began with the birth of Christ. This is a time for the whole church to reaffirm trust in God's promises, trust in the past, present, and future.

This passage also reminds us of the corporate nature of Christian faith. Faith isn't just something that belongs to the individual, or even a local congregation. Faith is public in that the beliefs

and actions of individuals influence other people. This passage is more about horizontal relationships between people rather than vertical relationships between people and God.

In the books of the prophets, and in the *Magnificat by Mary* in the first chapter of Luke, we're repeatedly reminded that God's promises include social, economic, and political relationships. Jeremiah anticipates a time to come when kings will do what kings are supposed to do, specifically, they will practice justice and righteousness. When the king, that is to say, the government, practices justice and righteousness, then the nation and the cities are healed and saved. When we as individuals practice justice and righteousness in our relationships with others, it will infect the culture around us. When we expect it of our leaders, they will come to expect it of themselves. We can participate in the journey toward God's future for us. Or, we can actively steer away from that path. We can sit passively in the back seat and whine, "Why aren't we there yet? Our actions can't change the eventual realization of God's dreams for the world, but we can either hinder or assist in the journey.

I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future will be the reality. I long for the day that is surely coming in God's future when the poor are not sent to shelters or forced to sleep on the streets. I long for the day that is surely coming in the future, when violence is forsaken and we will stop producing body bags because there is no need for them. I long for the day that is surely coming in the future, God's future, when there is no room for rancor, a day when our world is no longer torn apart by racism and sexism and jealousy; A day when the lion shall lie down with the young calf, when the corporation will nurture its employees, when the powerful nation will raise up the struggling country; A day when a little child shall lead them; a time when the needs of our children for love, nourishment, and education will lead us to set different priorities. I long for the day when we no longer thwart God's promises and blur God's dream for all the children of God. Are we there yet? No. We must stand up, face forward, and lean into the future that God envisions, if we are to be part of that future! Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

God wants to know:

Will we trust God above all else?

Will we sacrifice our hearts to God?

Will we sacrifice our children or sacrifice with our children?