



***Waiting With Hope***©

Jeremiah 33:14-16

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Happy New Year! With the coming of Advent, also comes the first Sunday in the new, liturgical year ... that is ... as time is counted with the church calendar. The old year now is past and we begin anew. I think that's a fine thing, don't you?

This past year was good in many ways, but it's always nice to be able to have a fresh start. Clear the slate of all the old worries from last year and just look ahead with hope and joy.

Wouldn't it be nice if it were that easy – if we could just clear out anything that was negative, anything that was hurtful, any grief, or sickness, or pain, or fear?

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way, does it? In fact, I'll bet you didn't come here this morning thinking about the new year starting in the church. Did you?

You may be thinking about Christmas coming and what all you have to do to prepare for it; who you have on your gift list, and what in the world will you get them? How is your budget going to stretch that far? When will you have time to shop and decorate and bake? And those are just new things to worry about, added on to the list of things you already are concerned about.

Christmas is a "most wonderful time of the year!" as the song says. But we could also say it is the most stressful time of the year, as well. So often, we come into this season with all kinds of expectations; we want everything to be just right – we want everyone to be happy and pleased and to "feel the magic" of the Christmas season.

And sometimes we get so stressed, so tired, that we forget what it's all about. I kind of look at this time of year as being two separate seasons, running parallel with each other: there is the one I just described – the one with all the rushing and busyness, all the parties and lights and Christmas music playing everywhere.

It is usually fun and can be joyous, a time filled with memories of the past and new memories being made. Most of us mostly enjoy this season.

It's the season that is part of the culture. It's the season that is a mixture of stress and joy and maybe a little magic if we have the resources and energy to make it that way.

It's the season that comes and then goes, leaving us – sometimes – with a sense of being let down, because after all, we can't possibly live up to all the expectations others have of us, or that we have of ourselves.

It's the season that rushes past and ends pretty much the day after Christmas with decorations coming down and life moving on as usual. It's the season that ends with the close of the old year and the start of a new one.

And then there is the *other* season. It is the season that opens with a new year of possibility and hope and promise. It is a season of reflection and quiet waiting with hope for a promise to be fulfilled that was made long, long ago.

This is a season where we don't bring out all the lights, all at once, all the Christmas music, all the glitter. Instead, we sing hymns about the promise we are waiting for. We slow down and pray more. We reflect on how our lives have changed over the last year – on how our spiritual selves have grown – or not.

We ponder what has happened in our lives and in the world we live in, and we think about what it means that God came into our human world as a baby, born to poor peasants, born in a stable with rags wrapped around his tiny body.

We think about that story and those who came searching for him – some to worship him, and some, to destroy him. We reflect on how he and his family became refugees, fleeing in the night from the terror that was happening in Bethlehem as King Herod had all the baby boys two and under murdered – all out of his fear of losing power.

We ponder how, as different as the world is today, some 2,000 years later, in a way, it really isn't all that different. There is still evil in the world, still those who would terrorize innocent people, ruthlessly killing women and children, along with the men.

There is still grief and pain and sickness, in spite of the fact that God came to earth as that baby who grew up to become a man who taught amazing things – things we still try to understand and follow, even today.

He performed miracles; he healed people; he comforted people; he died a horrible death, and somehow in that sacrifice, we believe that we have grace, that we are forgiven of our sinful, selfish ways.

And even more amazing is the fact that he rose from the dead, promising that he would return again, finally completing the kingdom where there would be no more tears or sickness or pain – but in place of that, there would be peace.

This is a season for pondering why – after all these years – we would still wait and hope and believe that he is really coming. This is a season that, if we allow it, our hope is renewed, our patience is restored, our spiritual selves are made stronger and we discover a peace in the midst of the storms of life.

This is a season called Advent; a time where we live “in between.” We are in between Jesus' first coming as we prepare to celebrate and give thanks to God for his great gift of Jesus to us. Jesus, the Christ, the Savior.

If he had only come once, without ever promising to come again, it would have been enough, wouldn't it? For in that coming we have known salvation, forgiveness and the promise of new life now, and eternal life when we are called home.

But he *did* promise to come back, and so we *do* wait with hope. But what makes this hope any different than hoping, say for example, for a new game for Christmas. Or hoping we will have enough money to buy all the things we want to give to others?

If those things happen, we feel happy and probably thankful and blessed. But if they don't happen, we will most likely forget all about it in a short time. Right? That kind of hope for those kinds of things are fairly trivial, when we put it into perspective.

But the hope I'm talking about is the same kind of hope the Israelites were clinging to at the time when Jeremiah made this bold prophecy. Here they were in Babylonia – exiles in captivity.

They had lost everything – their homes, their belongings, they lost their country and their freedom; the holy city – Jerusalem – was in shambles – the temple destroyed. Loved ones had been killed. Their captors had mocked them, asking where was their God now.

It was a dark time in the life of Israel, the people who were supposed to be God's chosen. They were the people the promise had been made to – the covenant with David that promised God would always love them; would always be with them; there would be a new restoration of a monarchy like they had with David, an eternal kingship.

But here they were in this dark reality that was far from home; that looked totally different than what they envisioned the promise to look like.

Yet, Jeremiah boldly says it anyway: <sup>14</sup> *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.* <sup>15</sup> *In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.* <sup>16</sup> *In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." (NRSV)*

Anne Stewart, who wrote a commentary on this passage in Jeremiah for Working Preacher.org, writes: "... this alternative reality is grounded in a claim about God's faithfulness -- it will be called "The Lord is our righteousness" (Jeremiah 33:16).

Bridging the chasm between the present reality and the promised future is only possible by an act of faith that God's righteousness will triumph. Jeremiah suggests that confidence in God's righteousness enables belief in a new reality."

I did a word study on that word *righteousness*. And for God it means that God is full of justice – that which is right; God is faithful to God's word, faithful to who God is, and so He is also faithful to us. He keeps His promise even when we do not. God's love is steadfast; God is trustworthy.



And isn't that exactly what keeps us, who are believers, waiting with a faithful hope that is so much stronger than the kind of hope I mentioned earlier – a hope that can be easily forgotten when it fails?

It is God's righteousness that Jeremiah talked about, that gave the Israelites reason to wait with hope; reason to keep on believing that God had not forgotten them and that the promise was just as true as they sat weeping by the waters of Babylon as it was sitting in the temple gates in Jerusalem.

God, in God's righteousness, in God's faithfulness, does not break a promise. God's timing is not our timing; God's ways are beyond our understanding, yet God is trustworthy.

And, if Jesus – Immanuel (God with us) said he was coming back and would establish a peaceful kingdom that would be eternal – then we can continue waiting and hoping, preparing and watching.

Advent runs parallel with all the cultural Christmas preparations, but brothers and sisters in Christ, you are invited to step over the line from that season, to the Advent season – right here where you can breathe again, where you can escape the other, so

you can think and reflect for a while, where you can get your perspectives and priorities back in line.

Here, you can worship and reflect on the Chrismons on the tree – those symbols that represent Jesus. This is a place where we wait together, patiently holding off, for the most part, on singing the great Christmas hymns until Christmas Eve.

This is a place where we grow in our understanding and our faith; a place where we will most certainly celebrate, with great joy, the birth of our Savior, Jesus. And that celebration won't end the day after Christmas, but will extend on into the first part of January.

Advent means waiting with hope. You are invited to enter into this very special season of waiting and hoping, preparing and longing, reflecting and praying. And so it begins.

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