

## ***Irrepressible Hope***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Scripture: Jeremiah 33: 14-16

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I'm quite confident that preachers before me have told you about the context of the prophetic message of Jeremiah. The people of Judah, as God's people are known to do, have broken their part of the covenant with God. The Babylonian empire has plundered Judah, particularly Jerusalem – sacked the whole town. Plucked the people out of their home, and replanted them, assimilated them in Babylon. Death and destruction around them, a conquering empire telling them that, sure, they can no longer worship their God, and now, their Temple is gone. But if they capitulate, when in Babylon, they can find a new normal among Babylonians.

There is a despair that has taken hold among God's people. They cannot imagine any hope, any possibility. So this vision of Jeremiah's, a vision of hope, was probably laughable to many – just not possible. It is a perilous spiritual place to be, in utter despair. I'm immediately taken to the realities of a Colonial power occupying this land we call Canada. The First Peoples learning of the Canadian government's assimilation strategy that requires First Nations children being plucked from their homes to live in Residential Schools, some of them operated by The United Church of Canada. A deep and chronic despair takes hold.

Healing from that spiritual pain takes time. And perhaps people understand that existential pain. Prophets are more often associated with messages of judgment. That is only part of their role as mediators of God's voice. A major role of prophets, like Jeremiah, is being a voice of irrepressible hope. Not just human hope, but divine hope. And that is the voice we hear today in the paraphrase.

I'll get right to the point, on this very full Sunday. I think that we are barraged by death and destruction around us, perhaps death is closer to home for some of us than others. But we look around and we experience exile in many ways. Language and events that feel profoundly unfamiliar, hostile, but psychologically we compensate, try to find new normal. We need Jeremiah's voice in our ears today, on this first Sunday of Advent, a New Year spiritually for Christians.

The prophet speaks to his people of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, a vision of audacious hope, that there is a new Jerusalem emerging – a new leader coming who, the paraphrase says, will seek justice, a ruler who will live in right ways. The Hebrew word is *tsedaqah*, meaning "righteous". Living in right ways, right relationships, justice. The people making right their part of the covenant. God never abandoned them.

I suspect that we all become normalized when we feel emotionally, spiritually, we are in exile. Whether we face enormous uncertainty in our health, or dysfunctional relationships, or witnessing our world or our own personal lives seemingly gone mad – and we feel like Job. Prophets ancient and modern times call us to hope, to trust... utterly absolutely trust in God. But for our part of the covenant with God is that we seek *tsedeqah* – that we be intentional this Advent to be righteous in our actions and words.

In my time as an Ecumenical Accompanier for the WCC observing the Israeli checkpoint between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, making sure that Palestinians were being treated justly as they tried to pass, I had a few opportunities to strike up conversations with the often young Israeli border police officers. I will never forget the comment a young woman made to me when I shared that I was from Canada. She pointed out the seeming hypocrisy of coming across the sea to hold one nation accountable for occupying unjustly another, when my own country, steeped in Christianity, has for so long occupied this land unjustly. Her voice haunts me.

Perhaps for some or many of us, the cause of experience of exile is that we have work to do to make things right in our lives. More emotional courage and attention we need to give to that messy relationship that plagues us. Opening our eyes, but perhaps also our hearts and wallets, when we see a situation of injustice or tragedy that nudges us. This Advent, let us, each of us, seek those places in our soul where we feel exile, and let Jeremiah's God, our God, sing to us with notes of irrepressible hope, that a day is coming ... fast approaching ... when things will be made right. Nothing is impossible with God.

Just this morning I was peeking at Twitter and found a tweet that I think is timely, and speaks to the Gospel reading this week, an Apocalyptic passage that is a close relative to prophetic works since apocalyptic passages remind us that "a day is coming"... The tweet quoted the Pastor William H. Lamar IV of the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in the heart of Washington D.C., where I was blessed to worship during a conference I attended earlier this year.

Referring to way we cope or compensate with pain, Lamar says: The numbness is being broken. The Novocain is wearing off. Witness the ugliness around us and declare its temporariness. Experience the beauty surrounding us and know that it will fill the earth. Your redemption is coming, and God is doing this all by Godself. Expect something extraordinary in worship (and life) today.