



“Our Legacy”

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Eden United Church of Christ, Hayward, California
First Sunday in Advent*

*Sunday, December 3, 2006
Jer. 33:14-16 (NRSV)*

Today’s Old Testament reading originated from the mid 6th Century BC. It emerged from one of the bleakest periods in the history of Ancient Israel. The nation and the Temple were in ruins, and the few who survived the Babylonian invasion were taken as slaves to serve in the homes, businesses, and the court of their captors.

The Babylonian exile was a bleak period in the history of Ancient Israel, but the people—at least in the mind of Jeremiah—were not without hope. In chapter 33, verses 14-16, we read his bold proclamation to the captives:

¹⁴The 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. ¹⁵In 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. ¹⁶In 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.”

This prophecy—this divine promise made through Jeremiah—reminded the exiles of God’s covenant with David. This was an everlasting covenant, in which God promised a permanent dynasty and security through the stability of government, worship, and communal life.¹

Unlike the Sinai Covenant (God’s covenant with Moses), the Davidic covenant was not conditional, nor dependent upon the faithfulness of the people. When Israel broke the covenant, breaches were viewed as setbacks, which required confession and forgiveness, but the covenant was no longer considered void.

The uniqueness of the Davidic covenant was not its content, which was identical to the Sinai Covenant, but its form and spirit. The Davidic covenant was extended not only to David but to his progeny, and was not written on stone

¹ Jeremiah Unterman, “Covenant,” in *Harpers’ Bible Dictionary*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row) 191-192.

tablets, but on human hearts, so that it might become part of each person's nature, and so that each one would exude the principles of the covenant in their daily lives.

The New Testament writers followed the prophets' interpretation of the Davidic covenant, and saw Jesus as the fulfillment of it. In their minds, Jesus was the messiah whom the prophets anticipated, and the fulfillment of God's promise to David. Jesus was, in Jeremiah's view and the view of the early church, "the righteous Branch" of David's family tree.

Jesus was one of David's progeny through whom justice and righteousness was and continues to be executed. As Christians, we are heirs to this Davidic covenant and beneficiaries of Jeremiah's prophecy and the Davidic legacy. We share in this everlasting covenant with God—a covenant through which God promised eternal faithfulness and universal grace—a covenant which is not dependent upon our worthiness, but upon God's grace and our acceptance of it. It is this new covenant that we celebrate through the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Today's passage reminds us of the Davidic covenant, the Davidic lineage, and the Davidic legacy, and serves as an invitation for us to recall the covenants, lineage, and legacy that we participate in and pass on to our progeny in the faith—be that progeny our legal heirs (i.e., our own sons and daughters and their children) or our spiritual heirs (i.e., the children of our congregation and wider community).

Often in modern times we think of covenant, lineage, and legacy as intertwined, and we think of these covenants in very concrete terms such as legal documents, like the California law code, civil marriage and birth certificates, and our wills and family trusts.

My hope is that all of the adults in the room have a will and review and update it every few years. If we don't have a will, of course, the State of California provides one for us through its law codes, but these laws generally favor the State over our heirs or would-be heirs, so it behooves us to do our own planning and document that planning in a legal manner.

In addition to thinking about who we are in a covenantal relationship with, and what material property we may wish to pass on in posterity, there are other legacies to consider and steward for our posterity, such as our cultural and family customs.

Today, through the artistic gifts and imagination of Jenifer Miller and her great-grandmother's artistic legacy, our hall is filled with myriad examples of how holiday traditions are passed on from one generation to the next in a wide array of cultures.

The bulletin insert today includes Jenifer's description of the origins of these paintings and how they were inspired by her great-grandmother's art work which she unearthed through some family history research. Jenifer writes about how her Great-Grandmother Ingerman attended art school in Chicago, and made her living as a single mother by illustrating the *Christmas Annual*, an art and literary book printed by the Lutheran publishing house, Augsburg Press, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

While not all of us think of ourselves as artists like Jenifer or her great-grandmother, all of us come from particular cultures and have the capacity to reflect on the unique traditions that we were raised with, and we determine how we pass on these traditions or perhaps even start new traditions to pass on to our children and/or the children of our congregation.

I know for myself that Christmas is the time of the year when the German, Bohemian, and Swedish ethnic traditions which are part of my heritage loomed largest in childhood, and that even as an adult Christmas isn't complete without trotting out at least some of these customs, even now. Perhaps the most distinctive tradition of my childhood and ancestry was the St. Lucia Festivals which we celebrated at Our Savior's Lutheran Church.

In the evening, every second Sunday in Advent, the entire congregation gathered for a candlelight vespers service in the Sanctuary which included choir music and hand bells ringing, congregational caroling, and a procession of the high school girls in long, flowing gowns wearing rings of candles on their heads. After the service, the congregation moved from the sanctuary to the fellowship hall to eat Christmas cookies and sweet breads, and sip tea, coffee, hot chocolate and hot cider while sharing Christmas plans and swapping family recipes.

So we pass on material property and cultural traditions to our posterity, but that isn't all. We also pass on our faith and our values, whatever they may be. Today's scripture reading and this sacramental table remind us that we are heirs to a spiritual legacy through Christ—a legacy that's based on love and grace—which we are invited to share with others.

At yesterday's leadership retreat, our Cabinet members spent some time reflecting on and describing our respective spiritual heritages which had formed us thus far, and which may have contributed to how and why we are now part of Eden Church.

The stories were tremendously varied, as are the people who serve in leadership in our church and who are members of our congregation; but there were common threads running through all of our stories. One of these common threads was the fact that each of us realized that we have a spiritual legacy that has been handed

on to us—not always through our families of origins—and not always of our liking—but a legacy that has been none the less formative.

To be sure, we have some choices as teens and adults about what beliefs and values we will continue to embrace from those that we have received, and those that we will pass on to our posterity.

I often think of the annual tradition of decorating our Christmas trees as a metaphor for this discernment process about our faith and values. For example, most of us probably have lots of Christmas ornaments that we get out each holiday season—more than we could ever fit on the tree. So each year, we have to decide which ornaments go on the tree, which ones go back in the box, which ones we pass on to others, and which ones we discard. So it is with our beliefs and our values. We get to decide what we keep, what we accept as part of our past but no longer useful, what we pass on to others, and what we discard.

To begin this discernment process, it is helpful to begin with a period of remembering and reflecting on those who have helped shape our faith and values. Who are they? Who are our spiritual benefactors? Who nurtured, poked, maybe even prodded us into holding the faith and expressing the values that we now practice in our lives?

Likewise, who are our spiritual progeny? What of that which we have learned, believed, and valued do we want to be intentional about passing on? What do we hope to leave by the wayside?

These are the questions that Jeremiah's prophecy prompts us to consider. These are the questions to which the prophet invites us to be the answer.

As we gather around the communion table today, let us give thanks for those who have provided us with a spiritual legacy and firmly embrace our role as stewards of these gifts, so that we, by the grace of God, may share them in new and nuanced ways with our posterity. Amen.