



“Great (and Righteous) Expectations”

**Pepper Swanson
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California**

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Jeremiah 33:14-16**

The prophet Jeremiah lived a long, long time ago—about 600 years before the birth of Jesus, in the kingdom of Judah, which is the name of the Southern Kingdom of the ancient Israelites. He was the son of a priest in a town known as a priestly community, just two miles outside of the capital city of Jerusalem. He was one of many people who were sent by God to be a prophet to the people, which means he was called to speak forthrightly to the people of Judah about God’s concerns.

The people and leaders of Judah were a good people but they had some bad habits. First of all, they liked worshipping idols rather than the God of Israel. Second, they tended to forget about their responsibility to care for the poor, for widows, orphans, foreigners, and the elderly. Third, they weren’t always fair in their dealings with each other.

They had a good king for awhile, his name was Josiah, and he tried to teach them better habits. He destroyed all the altars to their idols, moved all the worship to the Temple in Jerusalem, and had the Jewish law read out loud at the Temple every eight years so the people might know how to worship God and follow God’s instructions.

Unfortunately, King Josiah was killed in battle and a new king took his place. The new king, whose name is Jehoiakim, had a lust for power and luxury and ignored Josiah’s religious reforms, allowing paganism to spread again throughout Judah

In 609 BCE¹, Jeremiah, who didn’t like what was happening in Judah, went to the Temple and delivered a prophecy, warning the people to change their ways or face dire consequences from God. Jeremiah’s warning didn’t go over well with the Temple and royal authorities and consequently, he was barred from returning to the Temple.

Five years later, in 605 BCE, Jeremiah dictated a scroll and had it delivered to Jerusalem. God, Jeremiah warned the king and the people, was making plans to summon an enemy from the North to destroy Judah if they failed to change their ways. The king was not, to say the least, impressed with Jeremiah’s scroll and burns it as it is read to him. Fearful that the king would kill him, Jeremiah went into hiding and dictated

¹ All dates are as suggested by: Holladay, William L., *Jeremiah: A Fresh Reading*, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1990.

another scroll, stressing that God's plan to bring an enemy to destroy the people was now irrevocable. It would happen.

In 598 BCE, just three years after Jeremiah's second scroll, Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah, was besieged and then conquered by Babylon. The current king (the son of Jehoiakim, who may have been assassinated in the siege), thousands of royal and elite citizens, and the treasure of the country was taken to Babylon.

Surprisingly, despite the object lesson unfolding in front of them, the people who were left behind in Judah became complacent, so complacent that they failed to change their ways and continued their old habits. We can imagine how frustrated both Jeremiah and God were by their failure to change or reform.

Under God's guidance, Jeremiah continues his campaign to reform the people, both those exile in Babylon and those in Judah, but he also grew angry with God for giving him this thankless job. As his bitterness increased, a cousin came to him in prison where he was being held by the new king, a puppet king installed by Babylon, and begs him to buy a family field from him. Jeremiah prays and comes to believe that God is telling him to buy the field.

Jeremiah takes God's directive to buy the field as a sign of hope for the people. His spirits lifted, Jeremiah begins to preach good news, rather than destruction and punishment for sin. His—and God's—words of consolation and promise come at just the right time, for once again, ten years after Judah was first vanquished by Babylon, the captors have returned to Jerusalem, intent on felling the city and destroying the Temple. Now, more than ever, the people need to hear that God is on their side.

In words often referred to as the Scroll of Hope or the Book of Consolation, Jeremiah promises the people in the misery of the Babylonian siege that God will make with them a New Covenant, the words of which will be written on their hearts, rather than on stone tablets, so they might know how to behave toward God and toward each other. And God will also restore their fortunes and bring the exiles home to Judah.

And, according to today's scripture, their restoration, their salvation, will not be limited to restoring their faith and their wealth. Their restoration will be political and governmental as well, for God will fulfill a promise to give Judah a Righteous Branch, an earthly king, a king of the line of David, who will be righteous, and make the people safe, giving Jerusalem the new name "The Lord is Righteousness."

Why righteous?

II

Righteous is one of those church words that makes me squirm. Outside of church, there is really only one use of the word and it's a negative one: self-righteous, as in she (or he) is so *self-righteous*. We're pretty clear about what that means: the person under discussion thinks of him or herself as better than others, faultless, perfectly—and possibly hypocritically—pious or religious. None of us want to be self-righteous, which is

why it always feels so odd to be asking God to make us righteous or praying to a Righteous God.

In ancient times, however, righteous had two different and more positive meanings.² The first definition of righteous was the strict *justice* with which kingdoms or countries ought to be governed or laws administered. In America, that definition of righteous sounds familiar; after all, we pledge allegiance to a country devoted to liberty and justice, we have a system of justice with which to ensure our laws are enforced, and we have constitutionally protected freedom to advocate for justice where we see it lacking.

The Biblical concept of justice, however, is a little broader than our own, because it is based, not on the democratically written laws that under gird our justice system, but on God's law and most particularly on God's covenant with the ancient people who lived not in a democracy but a theocracy, a government based on the authority of God. Values of justice in a theocracy include not only obeying the law but also protecting the weak, acting compassionately toward the poor and those in need, not using one's wealth or power to take advantage of others, and loving God with all your heart, mind, and strength.

The second definition flows from the first. Righteous also means the *correct behavior* or *virtue* of the people themselves within their families, neighborhoods, tribes, and state. A righteous person in Biblical times is one who has the characteristics and values to help those around them achieve right relationship to one another. A righteous person would be kind, generous, fair, compassionate, and faithful to God and God's laws.

In today's scripture, the prophet Jeremiah uses the word righteous three times in both of the Biblical meanings. In the *Learning Bible* that the confirmation class is using this year, the scripture is translated as:

*The Lord said: I made a wonderful promise to Israel and Judah, and the days are coming when I will keep it. I promise that the time will come when I will appoint a king from the family of David, a king who will be honest and rule with justice. In those days, Judah will be safe; Jerusalem will have peace and will be named, "The Lord Gives Justice. (CEV)"*³

And thus, what God promises Judah, as their kingdom is being defeated and their temple destroyed for their injustice, in their grief, is a time when justice will reign in the people, in their king, and in their country. Though it will be 50 years before Babylon is conquered by Persia, the exiles do return to Judah and a new temple, the center and heart of their faith, is rebuilt in Jerusalem in 520 BCE. As they waited for renewal and restoration, what sustained them was God's promise of the New Covenant, the words of which would be inscribed on their hearts, and their great expectation of a new king, who

² Richardson, Alan and John Bowden, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Philadelphia, PA 1983

³ Contemporary English Version, 1995, American Bible Society, p. 1411.

would lead them to be the kind, generous, fair, compassionate, and faithful people God had asked them to be.

III

As we enter the season of Advent today, we begin our own preparation for a Righteous Branch, the one who will enter our world as a baby on Christmas Day. Each year, I use these weeks before Christmas both to prepare and to reflect on the world into which Jesus will be born this time.

The year 2009 CE has not been a particularly righteous year. Recent headlines broadcast the failures to achieve Biblical-style justice all around us. The stock market is recovering but unemployment is at its highest level in 25 years, with over 10 percent of the population out of work, higher if you are Hispanic or African-American, among whom the rates are 13 and 15 percent, respectively.⁴ The number of Americans living in households without adequate food soared this year to 49 million, the highest number since 1995 and 13 million more than any expert had expected.⁵ If you are unemployed and poor, it's harder than ever to get credit and if you've got credit, it's easier than ever to get sucked into a lifetime of paying fees and exorbitant interest rates. Violent crime continues at record levels, bringing global attention to the mistreatment of children and women that has become endemic around us. Recent legal and electoral defeats of same-sex marriage and our local legal battles to simply include LGBT people and families in diversity curriculum are daunting, leading us to wonder if we will achieve these important civil rights in our lifetime. The Congressional debate over national healthcare reform has devolved into partisan bickering and chest-pounding, gun-toting assemblies of opposition. And the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan rage on and on.

And it is not only the world around us that feels under siege by the metaphorical Babylons of life, but also the world within us. Loss of love, the death of a cherished dream, the failure of friendship, the absence of family—we are not who or where, physically and emotionally, we expected to be in the year 2009, and our sorrow conspires to exile us from those who would comfort us if they could.

Whether our “injustice” is public or personal, we can't help but scan constantly for signs of hope for a better time ahead. For Jeremiah, hope was a family field bought from a cousin, a symbol of belonging and future security that God had denied the prophet as a young man seeking marriage and children. For us, signs of hope can be show-stopping, like the night President Obama was elected and thousands stood and stared and wept for the justice affirmed that day, and for us, signs of hope can be heart-stopping, like the rare friend who takes the time to ask: *Are you all right?* Personal, political, large, or small, signs of hope abound if we take time to understand that hope is what we need.

⁴ U.S. Unemployment Rate Hits 10.2%, Highest in 26 Years
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/07/business/economy/07jobs.html?scp=2&sq=unemployment&st=cse>. Accessed Nov. 28, 2009.

⁵ Hunger in U.S. at a 14-Year High.
www.nytimes.com/2009/11/17/us/17hunger.html?scp=1&sq=food%20insecurity&st=cse. Accessed Nov. 29, 2009

Yes, Jesus will be born unto us again this year, not merely to save us in a metaphysical, other-worldly sense—although there are days we all desire that—but to begin the reign of heaven here on earth, here in our hearts, among each other. Where Jeremiah confronted and cajoled the Hebrew people about righteousness and justice, Jesus leads the way by example and story. Whether healing the blind, feeding the hungry, blessing the poor, forgiving the sinner, condemning the rich and arrogant, or questioning authority and power, Jesus demonstrates what it means to be a righteous leader and gives us insight into what a righteous community might look like.

And by coming into our world in a human form, Jesus raises our expectation that God is as concerned about righteous people and communities now as he was during Jeremiah's time. Jesus echoes Jeremiah's word: God promises us that we can expect, that we can hope, for our world—personal and political—to be restored to its proper character as God's compassionate and just creation.

My friends, the Good News on the first Sunday in Advent is that we can expect something great and righteous in the birth of Christ to come. We can expect God will come into our world to show us how to be a more righteous—how to be a more compassionate, kind, and just people. We can expect to find God's new covenant written on our hearts and we can expect that we will be called to serve as Christ's hands and feet and mouth as we join the struggle to make this world a more righteous place. And we can expect that the hope, peace, joy and love of Christmas will ring from our hearts, for the benefit of our community, our country, and our world. Amen.