

Jeremiah 33:14-16 “The Days Are Surely Coming”

I've been fascinated by the recent trend of folks getting DNA tested to trace their biological roots. I know a few decades ago, the trend was tracing our roots through family tree research. The Church of Latter Day Saints has a pretty sophisticated system for helping people track their ancestors, but DNA testing? That's a whole new level of curious! But it's not surprising. For some folks, who you are and where you come from is important. I know one of the interesting cultural quirks Mary and I ran into when we lived in Tennessee and Virginia was how many people wanted to know “who you are and who your people are.” Mary had the advantage of knowing enough about her family tree to say, “My family started out in Virginia in the 1600s. One of my ancestors was Miles Lunsford, who was exiled here for drawing his sword in the English House of Commons. Some of his descendants stayed in the area, and some migrated west. I'm part of the branch that migrated west.” All of a sudden, folks had a connection with her! “Oh, she's one of us,” even though her family had been away from the area for generations. They liked Mary. They didn't know what to do with me because I could only trace my family back *three* generations. I don't think they *liked* me any less than Mary, but I'm not sure they *trusted* me as much because I couldn't trace my roots back very far.

And I want to be clear that I'm not bringing this up because I'm being critical of some folks' interest in their (or others') lineage. Except for, of course, if you're a white supremacist and you just want to justify your racism. That's evil. Just stop. But I understand the curiosity if you're trying to find *common ground* with others in the human family. That's good. Carry on. This passage from Jeremiah lays the foundation for why both Matthew and Luke, the two gospel traditions that tell the story of Jesus' birth, are so concerned with Jesus being an ancestor of King David. See, for the Jews, David is considered the greatest ruler in Israel's history. He ruled during a time when Israel was at their strongest and most stable. When you look closely at the history of Israel and the Hebrew people, you see that they've always struggled with this

feeling that they're out of place ... or maybe the better way to say it is that they're *without* a place. It's like they're destined to wander. They're like a tree with no roots. Any time they get settled down, something happens and suddenly they're on the run, or they're wandering around in the wilderness, or they're being oppressed, imprisoned, or exiled by some despotic ruler. So it shouldn't seem strange that the Hebrew people appear preoccupied with their ancestry. Especially the prophet Jeremiah, who is writing during a time when the people have been uprooted from Israel and exiled to Babylon. Once again, they've been displaced and are feeling like a people without a home. So when Jeremiah offers the people a sense of "rootedness" by reminding them that they are a part of a much bigger, broader, and longer story, they're going to latch on to this hope that God will fulfill a promise that one day, someone from the family of David will come and restore justice and righteousness in the land. Thus, we call this first Sunday in Advent, "Hope Sunday."

So here's the question for today, since we've got Jeremiah's words in front of us this morning: How many of you are feeling settled, grounded, and balanced right now? If you are, great! Hold on to that while you can. But for a lot of people, especially those who are directly affected by the ongoing crisis of the Camp Fire, there is a feeling of anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity, disorientation and displacement. Sort of like the people of Israel when Jeremiah proclaimed these words. So how can we take Jeremiah's words this morning and apply it to the feelings we might be experiencing in our time and place? How can the prophet prophesy to us? Well, first of all, let me remind you what prophecy is and isn't, especially when we're dealing with the prophets of the Old Testament like Jeremiah. A lot of folks equate "prophecy" with "seeing into the future." And for some traditions that may very well be the case. In those traditions, there's no distinction between "Soothsayer" and "Prophet." But the prophets of the Old Testament were different. They were people chosen by God to deliver God's word. And yes, that might include a word about a future event. Here's the difference - "Mystical Soothsayers" predict terrible events that will inevitably happen in order

to strike fear in the hearts of their listeners. The prophets in this part of the Old Testament at least, always give people a chance to repent before those events happen. Why? Because God is a God who lets us choose. “If you go down this road, you are in danger of facing calamity. But if you repent and travel down *this* path, it may not.” Again, the prophets were just communicating what God told them to say, always with an opportunity to change the direction of whatever catastrophe they may be facing. Here’s the thing though – God told Jeremiah on day one that people weren’t going to listen. Now can you imagine Jeremiah’s response to that? And remember, Jeremiah was just a kid. “You’re telling me that you want me to go preach to people who aren’t going to listen to me. right?” “Yes.” “But why?” “Because I’ve got to give them a chance.” “This makes no sense to me at all God. Why bother if they’re not going to listen?” “Because it’s important for them to know that they had a choice and thus a chance to turn it around.” See, my 52 year old brain has a hard time processing that. I can’t imagine how a teenager would understand that! I’d be like, “Yeah, but if they ... and if you ... and if it’s all gonna ... how?! *Why?!?*” “Trust me. Listen to me. Tell them what I say. It’s what needs to happen and it will be alright.” “Okay, but I sure hope you’ll give me a decent reference for my resume when this is all over!” “I’m the only one you’ll ever work for Jerry, and you know it.” “Fine.”

But here in the midst of all these warnings, there’s a promise. And it’s not a new promise either. It’s a reminder of something God promised the children of Israel ... a promise meant to give people hope during uncertain times. “I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 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.’”

That doesn’t sound like a warning of terrible things to come, it sounds like an unconditional promise of *great* things to come. Who *wouldn’t* want justice and righteousness in the land? Well ... I shouldn’t say that. I’m sure this was bad news to the rulers who wanted to take Israel’s land

and render them powerless. They probably had a different or (can I say it?) alternative understanding of justice and righteousness. But for the regular people? Those people who feel powerless facing the powers that be who seek to keep them down? Again, “How many of you are feeling settled, grounded, and balanced right now?” I’m having a hard time holding on to that one.

But what I *can* hold on to is the promise that God does not delight in my destruction. Even when I fall short of God’s values and principles. Even when I act selfishly. Even when I fail to hear or when I choose to ignore the warnings of the prophetic voices that tell me that if I continue down the wrong path, I’m going to face potentially devastating consequences. But there is an alternative path. A path that leads to life. A path that, if we stay the course, will lead to justice and a right relationship with God. The path begins here and now. That’s what Advent season is about. It’s taking the first tentative steps towards celebrating the birth of the one who God promised through the words of the prophets who may themselves not have fully understood. We may not know what this all looks like. We may not understand the details or even the big picture. But we do have the promise that God will restore us ... that God will walk with us ... that in the end, justice and righteousness will be present.