

“But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

Thank you for joining us as our Advent Midweek Series continues with our next prophet, Jeremiah. As we progress through our series, we also progress forward in time as each prophet succeeds the next. Jeremiah succeeded Isaiah as Judah drew closer to its doom. Jeremiah hoped for a better city and a better country as Jeremiah would ultimately see Jerusalem, the Holy City of God, being invaded, ransacked, and destroyed by Babylonian armies. Even the Temple of Jerusalem, the sign of the Lord’s presence and favor with His people, was razed leaving the people shocked and dismayed.

How did it come to this that the temple was destroyed? It didn’t happen overnight. God kept sending prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah to warn the people of their wrongdoing. The people of Judah were sinking further into idolatry. They were worshipping false gods such as Baal, Molech, and Asherah. They refused to take care of the sojourner, the widow, and the orphan, and oppressed the weak.

The Lord made a promise to the people of Judah. In other words, He made them a covenant, but the refrain throughout the book of Jeremiah is that the people have broken that promise, and they have made the covenant null and void.

It is into this context of crisis and decline that Jeremiah the prophet was called. Jeremiah is the son of the priest Hilkiyah. Jeremiah started preaching during the reign of King Josiah, one of the good kings of Judah. Jeremiah had an initial hesitancy to the call of the Lord to be His servant. He said he didn’t know how to speak as he was only a youth. Yet the Lord reassures Him, **“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD.”**

Fear certainly must have been an element of Jeremiah’s hesitancy. Judah was a nation that flocked to false prophets who preached smooth words of peace and prosperity to a nation that was in actuality hell-bound. The Lord tasked Jeremiah to go against the crowd and speak inconvenient truths. Jeremiah was imprisoned, thrown into a stockade, and thrown into a cistern. He was with Jerusalem to the bitter end.

Jeremiah’s symbol is two stones in the stained-glass window above. It alludes to how many think Jeremiah died: death by stoning when he was taken down to Egypt by Jews fleeing the destruction of Jerusalem.

With such a bleak biography, it’s easy to wonder how God had a purpose for a figure like Jeremiah. But in this season of Advent, we reflect on the importance of God continuing to talk to His people, even when they reject Him. Jeremiah is in

that long line of prophets that would eventually culminate in John the Baptist who would see the Christ with his own eyes.

Jeremiah had lots of chances to tone down his message, and turn around and go with the crowd, but he kept on going because He had hope of a better country. He had hope that there was something more. He had the hope of heaven. As we go through this Advent season, we may feel like things in our society are only getting worse and that the United States is devolving into idolatry and paganism.

Yet, we have hope because Christ did come at Christmas, and He is going to come again to make all things right. In the meantime, we take solace in the ways that Christ regularly comes to us. He comes to us through His word. He comes to us through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It isn't given to us to change hearts, but as we remain faithful, we strengthen our hope in the better country, namely, heaven. As we remain faithful, maybe a few would come to believe and trust in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We have even better hope than Jeremiah because we have a better covenant. Jeremiah also looked to a better covenant. Jeremiah 31 is a memorable passage wherein the Lord promises a new covenant. A covenant written on the hearts of the people. We read, **“And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”** This covenant, or promise, is better than the old one that God gave to Moses on Sinai.

This is the basis for our text today. The new covenant offers promises better than can be imagined. The Lord says, **“‘And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.’** In a world where false prophets and negligent spiritual leaders were common, the promise of shepherds after God's own heart was remarkable. David was the king after God's own heart, but we see in Jesus Christ the greater David who is the good shepherd. We can praise the Lord, also for having provided us faithful pastors. I am thankful for the faithful pastors in my life, and many of you can think of the faithful pastors who have served you growing up.

Our text continues, **“And when you have multiplied and been fruitful in the land, in those days, declares the LORD, they shall no more say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the LORD.’ It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again.”** Perhaps the Ark of the Covenant is the stuff of legends. The Ethiopian church claims to have the Ark in one of their churches, but they won't let you see it. Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Ark may make us believe that it is forgotten in some government warehouse. Nonetheless, even if we could find the ark, it would not hold the same power and significance it did back in Bible times.

Why? Because there is a new Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant carried the very presence of the Lord, and it was where the high priest would stand before Yahweh Himself. In this Advent season, we can't help but think of the Virgin Mary, who when she was pregnant with Jesus, carried the very presence of the Lord.

In a similar fashion, but to a lesser degree, we can be said to be Arks of the Covenant as the Bible tells us that our bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit. What an amazing promise to have God with us wherever we go!

As we consider the covenant that Jeremiah looked forward to, we look no further than the night Jesus was betrayed which is our chosen Gospel text. Jesus was inaugurating a new covenant with His people that night in the upper room, and it was a picture of how He would interact with us. The New Testament often talks about the failings of the Old Covenant sealed by the blood of animals. The blood of Jesus has paid for all sins, and there is no more need for a sacrifice to appease God.

Our text concludes with these promises of God. **“At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart. In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers for a heritage.”** For Jeremiah to make these promises, many must have thought him crazy. Don't you know Jerusalem will be destroyed?

As we take solace in the new covenant of Jesus death and resurrection, of forgiveness and eternal life, we too look forward to a better country. This promise is fulfilled not in the establishment of the modern state of Israel or some other such geopolitical development, but in the arrival of the New Jerusalem at the second coming of Christ. As we gather for the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, we consider Jesus words to the faithful Centurion, **“I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,”** We see these promises in the Old Testament fulfilled in the New Covenant established by Jesus.

Take heart, the Lord kept Jeremiah, and He will keep you too until that day when the Advent promises of a coming Messiah are revealed in Christ's return. No matter what you may face in between: unrest, persecution, or even death, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen!