

Advent is a season of hope, of expectation, of waiting for things to improve. As we heat up turkey sandwiches in the microwave and promise ourselves we're never going to eat as much food as we did last Thursday, we already have our sights set on another festival, that of Christmas. But it is not yet.

In the time of the prophet Jeremiah, hope was a rare thing. In our Old Testament text, Jeremiah prophesies from prison as the king arrested him for saying that the Lord would let Jerusalem fall to Babylon for her sins. Jeremiah was right—the city of Jerusalem would indeed fall, and the people of Judah would be taken into captivity for seventy years. God tells the people He is hiding His face from the Jerusalem because of all their evil.

Yet despite this, we hear a word of hope. Our God declares: **“Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.”** 3. The Lord restores the fortunes of His People (v. 1–9).

The Kingdom to the north, Israel, had been wiped out, their population scattered. Judah, the southern kingdom was in peril from the Babylonians from the East. The countryside would be ransacked, the city besieged, and the population taken off to Babylon. What kind of hope was there in that?

But even before the city walls were breached, the Lord was looking ahead. He promised health and healing, prosperity and security. He promised that His people would be forgiven for their sins and rebellion. He would not reject His people, even though His people rejected Him.

What about our lives? Perhaps we feel surrounded on all sides. Besieged by enemies all around. In our case the enemies might not be a foreign nation, but something closer to home. Perhaps we have our sin struggles, habits we just can't shake. Things we know are wrong but feel too powerless to overcome. Perhaps these temptations have become all too normal, and what we once considered repulsive is becoming familiar and comforting. It's always been that way, we tell ourselves, and we forget things were different.

But God calls sin what it is for a reason. For His Old Testament people, Israel and Judah, their sin was worship of idols. What started out as simply having a statue on a shelf could lead to visiting a false god's temple. Just visiting could lead to a timid prayer, and a timid prayer leads all too quickly to full on worship. This false worship was unhealthy and harmful to God's people. Sacrificing grain and wine to an inanimate object, sleeping with temple priestesses, and in some cases even sacrificing children to appease their false deity.

God calls sin what it is for a reason. For His New Testament people, the Church, our false gods are more subtle. Perhaps not a statue on a shelf, but maybe an image on a magazine or a website. Perhaps not a grain offering, but another glass at the neighborhood bar. Perhaps not a prayer to a false god, but the next piece of gossip and the latest rumor.

What we find with these sins is that what once satisfied becomes the baseline and these gods we once appeased grow greedier and greedier as our appetites enlarge. The bottomless pit that sin habits can lead to is the exact problem that our Lord warns us against.

In a day when hope is a rare thing, the Lord gives us hope today. He promises to restore the fortunes of His people. That includes you. He offers us a new start. He offers peace and prosperity. He offers it through the forgiveness of sins and the promise of a new start. Advent is the start of a new church year, and with the promise of full forgiveness, we can kick sin habits and be hopeful for a better future.

Our text continues, **“Thus says the LORD: In this place of which you say, ‘It is a waste without man or beast,’ in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD: “ ‘Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!’ For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD.”**

2. The Lord restores the fortunes of the Land (v. 10–13). It’s a well-known phrase, “War is hell.” Anyone who has seen pictures of cities where battles were fought can see bombed out buildings, empty streets, and terrified citizens. The same was true of Jerusalem and Judah. After the war came, there was nothing left, not even a wild animal. Of course, there would be no parties. Of course, there would be no weddings. Of course, there would be no worship services.

But hope is a tenacious thing, it clings on where all evidence points otherwise. It looks beyond the present circumstances to a world that’s better, even if it seems fantastic and impossible.

In just the previous chapter, the Lord commands Jeremiah to buy a field in the midst of a siege. Talk about a fire sale! But that purchase was a testament of hope, that God’s people would eventually return to Jerusalem. In our text the Lord promises that there will be mirth, gladness, and weddings. There will be songs of praise, and there will be the restoration of the land that is about to be invaded.

In our land, things seem to be going backwards. Less and less people are involved with a church, the kids who at least went to Sunday School are giving birth to another generation who don’t know Moses or Aaron, David or Goliath,

Zacchaeus the tax collector or the story of the prodigal son. Our culture has traded paganism for piety, positive thinking for prayers, and gym memberships instead of church memberships.

We might mourn: where have all the people gone? We used to have two services because there wasn't enough room here for one service. Christmas was packed to the gills with everybody's family filling the pews. What about all the baptisms? What about all the weddings?

The Lord still promises: **“there shall be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD”** This is a promise for His Church. The Lord will restore the fortunes of His Land, namely, His Church on Earth.

Just earlier we read Psalm 136, and twenty-six times we repeated, **“for his steadfast love endures forever.”** Wherever God's people are gathered, great or small, loud or quiet, there is His Land. There is where His Church's fortunes are restored. There is where His hope clings.

It doesn't matter if it's a cathedral filled with thousands or a rented-out VFW hall with ten parishioners. Christ's church on Earth is the vanguard of a coming kingdom. Every congregation is a sliver in Satan's side reminding him his time is short. Every church building is a reminder of who really owns this world. Every Christian is a victorious soldier who cannot be defeated by sin, death, or the devil.

“For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD.” This promise will be fulfilled when Christ comes again and **“the holy city, new Jerusalem, [comes] down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”** In that city the voice of mirth and voice of gladness will never be silenced. *That* is our Advent hope.

How are all these amazing things going to be accomplished? The Lord gives us the answer in our text from Jeremiah: **“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In 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. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”**

1. The Lord restores through the Righteous Branch (v. 14–18). Even in the time of Jeremiah, the Lord had His plan for restoring His people's fortunes. What did it look like? It looked like restoring shepherds to the lands surrounding Jerusalem as we read about in verses 12 and 13. Shepherds who would be visited by angels and then be the first people to bow down and worship the righteous branch.

What the restoration of the fortunes of His people would look like is Jesus riding a donkey into the city of Jerusalem, the city that was destroyed Babylon and yet rebuilt as God promised.

God promised these great things in Jeremiah's day so He could pave the way for His everlasting promise: the eternal restoration of His people through Jesus Christ the righteous branch. Through Jesus, the Lord executed justice and righteousness. Through Jesus His people are saved, and we dwell securely.

Through Jesus the fortunes of His people are restored because the fortunes of Jesus were reversed. Jesus rode into Jerusalem to suffer false accusations, to be tortured, and to take your sin to the cross. It is through that sacrifice that your habitual sins were forgiven and removed. It is through His suffering that you can have a fresh start this Advent.

It is through His resurrection that you can have hope for an addiction or destructive behavior because just as Christ rose from the dead, even those who are dead in seemingly inescapable transgressions have an escape. Even those who have been dead in their sins have a second chance.

It is through this righteous branch's sacrifice that we the Church can take hope. Christ has died for the Church and rose again, cleansing us and making us holy, and as we continue to cling to Christ and His promises, we can have hope for the Church on Earth. After all it is Christ's Church—not your church, not mine, not Luther's.

Hope is rare thing in this day and age, but wherever Christ is this Advent, there comes hope and restoration. Christmas is but a few weeks in the future. As we wait for Christ to be born on Christmas, we can fill our homes and lives with the sounds of mirth and gladness because **THE LORD RESTORES THE FORTUNES THROUGH THE RIGHTEOUS BRANCH.**