

Hope in Righteousness

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Based upon Jer. 33:14-16; Rom. 15:7-13

What does righteousness have to do with hope? I've been asking myself this question all week in light of the texts we just heard. The *Romans* lesson celebrates hope, and so does our first Advent candle today. As Christians we always begin the new liturgical year with waiting and hope. We are waiting for the one whose coming we will celebrate on Christmas day, whom the Bible proclaims is our hope and our help. But the Lectionary does not leave us to dwell untroubled and unreflectively in the glow of the candlelight as we wait. Instead it invites us, as it always does, to begin the Advent season by pondering the teachings of the prophets. Some years that teaching is Malachi's disturbing image of God's grace burning us like a refiner's fire; some years, it is John the Baptist's insult-laden rant against those who refuse to change their ways. So by comparison, this year's proclamation from *Jeremiah* is surprisingly encouraging. "The 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. 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." Although Jeremiah is generally thought of as a doom and gloom prophet who told the people of Judah their sins had made exile inevitable, today's lesson comes from a three-chapter interlude within his diatribe, which scholars call "The Little Book of Comfort." These chapters were probably written long after Jerusalem fell and the people were taken away to Babylon. At that time even Jeremiah couldn't preach doom to a people experiencing so much misery. The people needed something to hope for, so he, or someone writing in his name, gave it to them in the form of a divine assurance that one day soon a successor to David would come to vindicate them. He would rescue the remnant of Israel, and restore the great city of Jerusalem.

When he offered them this hope, Jeremiah may have been thinking more about a short-term wait for a righteous-but-still-human king for Israel, not about a divine savior who would arrive miraculously six hundred years later to bring justice and redemption to the people. But even knowing that, Christians still can't help hearing Jesus in this proclamation. To us, Jesus clearly was the prophesied "shoot" from the "root of Jesse;" he was "the branch for David," who came to rescue and restore humanity. To us, Jesus was and is our reason to hope.

It's OK to interpret the scripture lesson this way. But to the extent that we believe that there is a connection between this text and Jesus, either intentional or unintentional, then it also follows that when it comes to how we are to understand and respond to his promised coming, there must also be a connection between what was prophesied would happen to the people of Israel and us. The text says that those who would be saved by "the righteous Branch" would be so changed by his coming that they, and/or the city of Jerusalem in which they lived, would come to be known by the name "*Yahweh Tsidkenu*," which means "God is our righteousness." So we are left with the question with which I began: "What does hope have to do with righteousness?" And while we are pondering that, we might as well also ask ourselves, "What does it mean to affirm with our lives that "God is our righteousness" to the world?"

The term “righteousness” is one of those clunky, churchy terms like “salvation” and “justification,” the understanding of which has become distorted or lost through the ages; as a result, the meaning of the term seems both totally obvious and completely obtuse at the same time. “Righteousness,” we sense intuitively, has something to do with doing the right thing or maybe being the right thing, or both. It has something to do with justice and truth, honor and integrity too. Those are all good qualities and concepts. But in our day and age, after centuries of believers have used Scripture to justify holier-than-thou posturing and judgmental point-keeping in the name of righteousness, the term rarely inspires warm fuzzies. It feels hard and cold, legalistic, and even medicinal somehow. We know righteousness is good for us because the 23rd *Psalms* says that’s the way in which our Shepherd Lord leads us. We also know from Jesus that if we follow that way, even if we are persecuted for it, we will be blessed. Is knowing that enough to make us want to be righteous? Is it enough to inspire hope? For contemporary Christians, maybe, and maybe not.

But in both Jeremiah’s day, and centuries later in Paul’s time too, righteousness was hope-inspiring. That is because righteousness was considered first and foremost an attribute of God, not human beings. To say that God was righteous was to say that God was just and reliable, good and true, not legalistic or arbitrary or cruel. To say that God was righteous was to say that God always did the right thing whether we understood that or not. It was to say that when God made a promise, God would keep it no matter what.

We see this understanding being celebrated in both of today’s texts, which were both written during times when some people were wondering about God’s plan and promises. After making his hope-filled branch prophecy, Jeremiah defends its truth by saying, “Thus says the Lord: If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken.” (Jer. 33:20). In other words, unless or until humanity discovers the power to control the universe as God can, God’s promises cannot be broken. They are woven into the very fabric of being. They are etched into God’s eternal covenants. One of those covenants promised that King David would have a dynasty that would endure in perpetuity. The coming of the righteous Branch fulfills this promise. Another of those covenant promises was made centuries before that to Abraham. God took Abraham out one evening and had him look up at the stars. “I will bless you and make you a blessing for others,” God said. “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them... So shall your descendants be.” (Gen. 12 and 17). The implication of this promise to Jeremiah was that notwithstanding Israel’s great difficulties in exile, their future survival was assured.

In today’s text from *Romans*, the Apostle Paul also appeals to God’s faithfulness and first covenant with Abraham. At that time some Christians were wondering what to make of God’s promises to the Jews because the Gentiles were embracing Christ more readily than they. Paul said, “Look. Don’t you remember that it was always part of God’s plan that the Jews and Gentiles would be saved and reconciled? Look at all these Scripture passages to that effect. The fact that Jews and Gentiles are coming together now is all the more proof that Christ is God’s messiah because those promises are coming true. Welcoming everyone into the Church is the righteous thing to do because it is all part of God’s plan. ‘Christ has become a servant of the

circumcised (*i.e. the Jews*), on behalf of the truth of God, in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs (*i.e. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob*), and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.’ (Rom. 15:8 – *italic inserts mine*). Paul wanted the Roman Christians to recognize a divine promise to the Jews and the Gentiles fulfilled in Jesus, so that they could be filled with hope in all circumstances.”

In both of these contexts, the hope that the authors offer is grounded in God’s righteous nature and God’s covenant promises, not in what humans did or did not do. God saved the Jews from exile notwithstanding their unfaithfulness. God came in Christ to save and reconcile the world notwithstanding the fact that humanity had not earned the right to such mercy. So one meaning of the name “God is our righteousness” that believers have been given through Christ, is that our righteousness comes from God, not from us. In this sense, righteousness has to do with our status before our divine judge, and acts as a synonym for justification. God through Christ, has “put us in the right” notwithstanding our breach of covenant because God who is just, is also merciful, loving, and good.

For the early Christians, and our Protestant ancestors during the Reformation, this news was very hope-inspiring. Martin Luther said recognizing this changed his life. That’s because people then believed they were like “lowly worms” before God, and doomed to eternal condemnation without Christ. Now our understandings of ourselves and God are so different, I suspect fewer Christians, of our sort anyway, worry much about eternal condemnation. We believe we are made in the image of a loving and forgiving God, and therefore may not find much-needed, renewed hope from being reminded of that truth. But if you have ever done things you are ashamed of, or failed to do things you know you should have, if you have ignored God for much of your life, or blamed God for your problems, then perhaps you can still feel the hope the Advent branch proclamation offers.

I attended a workshop on the opiate epidemic the other day at presbytery in which there was lots of talk about shame. People were ashamed to have become addicts or to have family members who were. They were ashamed they couldn’t fix their problems quickly and easily on their own. Jeremiah’s prophecy speaks to that shame. It tells us that even if our lives have been filled with brokenness, or we have committed horrible sins, we have every reason to hope for God’s mercy and believe in God’s love and grace because God is righteous, and has attributed that righteousness to us through Christ. God keeps God’s promises, and one of them is to love us and be with us always no matter what.

There is a second meaning to “God is our righteousness” however, which has nothing to do with our standing before God, and everything to do with how we stand with God before others. To Jeremiah especially, righteousness was defined not just by God’s nature, but also by the nature of the covenant God made with the people through Moses. Righteousness was a term which conveyed living a moral and ethical life according to the covenant way of God. Thus when Jeremiah made his branch proclamation, he was offering two kinds of hope. The first was that one day, according to God’s promises, a savior would come to redeem Israel and reconcile the world through them. The second was that one day the people of God would finally keep their promises and get righteous living right.

There is a wonderful children's book called The Phantom Tollbooth,¹ in which the two main cities of an imaginary world are called "*Dictionopolis*," and "*Digitopolis*" because in the former, everything has to do with words, and in the latter, everything has to do with numbers. This is how I envision Jerusalem in Jeremiah's prophecy, as "*Yahweh-is-our-righteousness-opolis*." Everything in the city would have to do with Yahweh – the way that people worship, the way that they care for the poor and needy, for widows, orphans, and foreigners, the way that they live with justice and integrity, honesty, compassion, and generosity. "You just wait," Jeremiah said, "one day you're going to get it right. Yahweh promises this too."

Although the first part of Jeremiah's prophecy has come true in Christ, we are still a long way away from the second part coming true. We may be righteous in God's eyes through Jesus, but we in the Church are not yet righteous in the world's eyes. To the contrary, as I said before, many Christians' attempts at being righteous have ended up being better examples of what not to do than what to do. Christians have been and are still often too self-righteous, too legalistic, too cold and hard and medicinal in their approach to living and sharing the Gospel. But the good news with which we begin Advent is that God keeps God's promises; therefore, we need not despair over our past or current failures, or give up. We have every reason to hope that humanity can and will one day get this right. We have every reason to keep trying.

In effect, Jeremiah's prophecy gives us both reason to hope, and reason to keep striving for greater righteousness. In this time between the first Advent and the second, we are called to live as those who know that even when the problems in our lives and in our world seem to suggest otherwise, God is with us. God will help us because God promised to do in Christ, and God is righteous. We are called to live as those who know that even though we may feel unworthy at times and filled with regrets, we are still beloved to God because God has made us righteous by forgiving and loving us. And we are called to live as those who know that God's way of righteousness, first articulated by Moses and then embodied in Jesus, is the right way to live. It is a way that may lead to persecution because it is not the way of the world, but which always leads to blessing because it is God's way. Thanks be to God, our righteousness, for giving us the opportunity to strive for better faithfulness notwithstanding our imperfections and mistakes, and for giving us reason to hope, notwithstanding the state of the Church or the world today, for the time when justice, mercy, peace, and love will most assuredly reign on earth. Amen.

¹ Norton Juster, Random House, 1961.