

Advent Reminders of God's Gifts: Hope

Can you think of anything that is unfair?

Do you ever say "***It is not fair***"? What might you say this about? Doing your brother or sister's chores? Not being able to go somewhere or do something you want to do? Dad getting the leftover piece of chocolate cake and not you?

There were lots of things that were not fair in Jeremiah, the prophet's, time. Just Jeremiah's listeners and their children – were forced to live in a foreign land as servants, not enough food, no chance to go to school, soldiers who told you where to go and what to do, etc.

That is when Jeremiah told them about God's promise and asked them to imagine how a fair, just leader who was one of them sounded rather than a foreign tyrant.

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.'" (Jer. 33:14-16 CEV)

Jeremiah was kind of an Advent hero. He lived in a time when everything around him looked bad. Foreigners were in control and his country looked like a dead stump. But, he remembered God promises and believed those promises were true. Just as Harry Potter knew that love like that of his mother was stronger than evil like that of Lord Voldemort and so stood up to Lord Voldemort bravely, Jeremiah knew that the Assyrians might rule for a little while but would finally be defeated by God. So he waited patiently and called on people around him to remember the promises and wait with him.

The most important thing to remember when bad things happen is that ***in the end evil will not win***. God and God's love will win. We have God's promise for that. We can trust God on it. At times this is hard to remember, but it is always true. We have this hope.

What do you think needs to be fixed in the world? More food for people. No war or refugees. Shelter for everyone. Clothing. Love for everyone. Forgiveness.

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These are the things that would make life fair. Let's pray to God for that.

Someone has said there are "three grand essentials to happiness in this life: something to do, something to love and something to hope for." (Joseph Addison at www.sermons.com)

The last may be the most elusive.

Emily Dickinson, ever perceptive in her poetry, has written:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers --

That perches in the soul --

And sings the tune without the words --

And never stops -- at all

("Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers)

Though hope is the church's stock-in-trade, it's pretty easy to get that message mixed up. The effect can be opposite to the intended point.

Humorist Lewis Grizzard wrote about a man in his hometown named Luther Gilroy. Luther claimed he was out plowing his field and saw a sign in the sky that said THE END IS NEAR. So Luther let his mule and his cow out of their pens, gave all his chickens away, and climbed on top of his house to await the end. When it didn't come, he pouted and refused to come down off the roof. Finally, his wife called the deputy sheriff, who came over and said, "Luther, you idiot, I saw that same sign. It didn't say, 'The end is near.' It said, 'Go drink a beer.' Now come down off that roof before you fall off and break your neck."

It's sometimes difficult to hear any hope, any optimism, in our world. Fear or pessimism trumps it. Contrary to hymnist Alberto Taule, "all earth is NOT hopeful," in reality it is just the opposite. Terrorism, economics, health care, defiance of authority in schools, no state budget, higher taxes – wow, things sound hopeless! In Jeremiah's time the people of Israel were enslaved, made to do things they didn't want to do and go places they didn't want to go. They might have sung "All earth is hope**LESS** . . ." – until Jeremiah came along with his message from God.

It's amazing how much we need messages from God, how much we need GOD! Do any of us come to church seeking messages from God? Optimism in the midst of a pessimistic and individualistic world? I hope so. Here is the haven of hope, where God's truth is declared, God's mercy is administered, God's eternity promised. The body of Christ tells of his coming as the hope the world needs. A righteous Branch will spring up who will make things right, fair, and safe. His name is Emmanuel, God-with-us.

The school system in a large city had a program to help children keep up with their school work if they ever needed to be in the hospital. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much.

But the next day, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?" (Bits & Pieces, July 1991, www.sermonillustrations.com)

Sometimes the most mundane message (nouns and adverbs) will carry a powerful punch of hope. Listen, learn, and be filled with Christ. Be open to receive the message. Evil cannot win the day. Hope will find us. God's righteous Branch comes to set us free.

The Rev. Robert E. Mitman