

+ Jeremiah 33:14-16 + Images of a Coming Savior: The LORD Our Righteousness +
+ 1st Sunday in Advent + 2 December 2012 +

Beautifully-wrapped gifts piled beneath an evergreen covered in twinkly lights and a host of ornaments. Stockings hung along a fireplace mantle. A tiny village of fragile buildings set up with care and pulled out only once a year. A slow snowfall with the big flakes that cover the ground quickly for sledding and skiing. A warm house dressed in colorful lights on the outside and decorated with old and new treasures on the inside with the smell of cinnamon or cookies or hot cocoa in the air. A happy family gathered around the dining room table ready to enjoy the feast spread out before them. A congregation packed into a church on a winter's evening listening to children speak and singing beloved hymns of the ancient birth of the Christchild. Images. All of them beloved images.

Few times of year are as jam-packed with images that evoke so many memories and emotional responses as this time of year. The turn of the calendar from November to December brings a flood of familiar images that evoke a wide variety of responses—from joy and hope to even anger and sadness. The turn of the Christian church year's calendar from the season of End Time to the season of Advent brings a flood of images that also evoke a wide variety of responses from sadness to joy and hope.

While images of a family dinner on a winter's evening or a beautifully-lit evergreen covered in ornaments may evoke happy memories of Christmas celebrations past, each Sunday in Advent focuses on a vivid image of the coming Savior. That image may fill you with hope, peace, joy, or confidence in the Savior, whose "Advent" or "coming" is the reason we prepare our hearts in these weeks leading up to Christmas. This morning the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah focuses on an image that gives hope to God's people, even in the midst of life's worst times, even when he comes to judge on the Last Day. Today we focus on **THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS**, who comes with justice to deliver and restore his embattled people.

What reason did they have for hope? Their whole world was falling apart. Their beloved city was under siege. Their prospects were grim. It was essentially Jerusalem against the entire Babylonian empire as the massive armies of Babylon and her conquered kingdoms brought wave after wave of attacks against the city walls. There was no peace in that city, no moment to rest. What was left of the kingdom of Judah was ruled by a man who shouldn't have been king, who knew nothing about justice or righteousness, whose ancestors had repeatedly rejected God's Word. Soon Jerusalem would fall. Soon the temple of the Lord built by Solomon nearly 500 years before would be stripped of its treasures and reduced to rubble. Soon thousands of Jews would be hauled off into exile over a thousand miles from home. Soon David's royal line would be cut off. The present was dark. The future was grim. What hope did they have?

Things didn't look all that great for the prophet Jeremiah either. He was under house arrest in the courtyard of the royal palace, and his future looked uncertain at best, especially since his enemies had attempted to end his life. The Lord, however, had other plans for Jeremiah and his people.

Yes, the Lord was allowing the kingdom of Judah to finally face the dire consequences of centuries of unfaithfulness towards him. Time and again the Lord had promised blessing to his people if they remained faithful to him, yet generation after generation had rejected the Lord's promises and blessings and pursued self rather than the Savior. Very real judgment was finally coming to Judah and Jerusalem, but yet the Lord of free and faithful grace sought to reassure those who remained faithful to him that not all was lost. In fact, the Lord had plans to richly bless his people. Into their darkness God shined the brilliant light of his grace, and gave his people a chance to peer into the future at someone who would surely give them hope.

"The days are coming...when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah." The Lord had made promises like these in the past. Surely in the midst of a siege, even believers would be tempted to wonder if God would ever come through for them. Would these terrible times ever end? Would David's royal line ever be restored, and how would God keep that promise with Babylon at the gate?

God responded with a vivid image. ***"In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line..."*** When you cut down a tree, generally it doesn't come back. In fact, if given time, the stump eventually rots away to nothing, but not in this case. Yes, the Babylonians would cut off the royal family tree of David after the siege ended, but the Lord of free and faithful grace would bring the dead back to life. Nearly 600 years later, ***"a righteous Branch"*** would sprout from the dead stump of David's royal line unexpectedly and without fanfare or paparazzi. A child would be born to a poor, virgin mother. This child would be human so he could be of the bloodline of David, but he also would be the true, holy, ***"righteous"*** God. He

would be the embodiment of God's justice, righteousness, and power. **"He will do what is just and right in the land."** He would bring peace to his embattled people. All who live in his kingdom of justice and righteousness would finally have peace with the holy God.

...But how would this **"righteous Branch"** give hope to his people? Not only would he carry out his justice on the wicked and bring peace to his people, but there would be deliverance. **"In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety."** He would restore the desolate land and his decimated people. He would bring peace and safety and life where once there was judgment and war and fear and death. In fact the Lord of free and faithful grace would put his holy name on his people—**"The LORD Our Righteousness"**. All who bear that holy name would enjoy life in the Lord's kingdom of grace because the Lord himself would graciously grant them his holiness. Bearing that holy name, they would have access to the throne of God through **"the LORD our Righteousness"**. Even in the midst of siege and war, God's people certainly had reason for hope.

What a beautiful image of the coming Savior, of a Lord who comes in justice and righteousness to save his people, yet the question must also be asked of us. What reason do we have for hope? It's true. We live in a difficult time. Yes, we don't have massive armies besieging our cities, but violence on TV, on the internet, in video games, and in our communities continues to increase. Economically, many are struggling to make ends meet and even find work. Morality is giving way to relativism, where what I think is good for me is my personal preference and you can't tell me otherwise or you'll be branded intolerant, old-fashioned, and out-of-touch. A conservative, confessional Christian worldview is increasingly under attack. Then there are any number of things that cause fear and trembling—terrorism, natural disasters, pandemics, "fiscal cliffs", and even that old enemy, death.

You would think that even as Christians we have little reason for hope. Many in our neighborhoods and communities (and perhaps even in our own homes) worry and fear for not only their future, but the future of their kids and grandkids. The present can seem dark and the future grim, but not all is lost.

As he did with the believers of old, the Lord has plans to richly bless his faithful people even today. Into our darkness God shines the brilliant light of his grace and focuses our eyes and hearts on the image of the coming Savior. You see, Advent isn't just about getting ready for Christmas. It's also getting ready for the return of **"the LORD our Righteousness"**. It means looking back to what he accomplished for you, remembering what he does for you even now, and looking ahead to what he's going to do on his return.

Unlike the kings of old and the leaders of today, **"the LORD our Righteousness"** doesn't just promise peace and safety and restoration. He actually carries it out. Now the Lord isn't promising world peace or the end of earthly violence and conflict or even that every human being is going to be welcomed into heaven. We are sinners living in a sinful world. By nature, you and I revel in disobedience against God's holy will. By nature, we revel in what pleases our sinful natures and their favorite temptations—lust, envy, violence, arrogance, greed, gossip, rage, and other foolish sins. By nature, none of us has any right to be part of the Lord's kingdom of grace. Instead he should pour out his holy judgment on each and every one of us, condemning every one of us to eternity in hell. That, however, is an image that none of us ever want to see.

God should and could hold each of us accountable for what we have done or failed to do, but instead he held his own Son accountable for us. **"The LORD our Righteousness"** did come from David's line. He lived in perfect righteousness according to every command of God's holy will. Then he willingly paid the penalty that you deserve from God's holy justice—death for every last one of your sins. He showed himself to truly be the Lord of free and faithful grace who willingly became your righteousness before God.

This same **"LORD our Righteousness"** placed his name on you and made you his child through the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism. When you were baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Lord gave you his name to make you his own son or daughter. He washed you clean of all your sins, and by his own blood, gave you access to the throne of God. The **"LORD our Righteousness"** saved you. He delivered you and gave you life. He restored your relationship with the holy God. He now enables you to faithfully serve God with all your gifts in every aspect of your life.

Into a world hurting and hating itself, scarred by conflicts and violence and immorality, dark and grim with sin, into that world came a living Savior, a king who brings justice and righteousness and healing, a king who saves—**"The LORD our Righteousness"**. He came once to fulfill this beautiful promise. He will come again to bring us into his heavenly kingdom of grace. May the Lord keep that image before your eyes this Advent! Amen.