

Our lectionary passages for this morning give us parts of two rather odd stories; two stories about men who are living in anxious times who nevertheless preach and act out of hope and encourage God's people to do the same. The first story is set during the dreadful time of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. It is some 350 years since David and Solomon's united kingdom was divided into Israel in the north and Judah in the south and about 150 years since Assyria obliterated the northern kingdom. The kingdom of Judah has been under at least nominal control of Babylon for a generation but has recently revolted. Now the Babylonians are back in power, intending to destroy Jerusalem. At the court of King Zedekiah, the prophet Jeremiah is under arrest, confined to the Court of the Guard, for continually warning that the kingdom will fall. Under the siege, the surrounding landscape has been devastated, people in Jerusalem are starving. In the midst of these exceedingly anxious times, Jeremiah gets a peculiar vision from God. His cousin, Hanamel, will come to him and ask Jeremiah to buy from him the family's land in their hometown of Anathoth. Indeed, the vision comes to pass. It is a desperate measure from a desperate man, no doubt. The land is worthless under these conditions, likely ruined by the Babylonians and unreachable by those in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Jeremiah buys the property, has the deed properly witnessed and sealed and even has a copy of the deed stored in an earthenware jar to preserve it, much as the scrolls we saw last weekend were preserved. Jeremiah makes this seemingly futile gesture, he says, "For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." Shortly afterwards, still in prison in the besieged city, Jeremiah records another vision of hope from God: "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... Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety."

Almost 600 years later, anxious times have come to Jerusalem once again. This time, the rebuilt city is firmly under the control of an occupying army, the Romans. Popular unrest and political intrigue have made the city a tinderbox. It awaits only a spark to blaze into rebellion, war and death. It does not take supernatural powers to know what is coming. Another young prophet, who will soon pay the price for his words, tells his followers his vision of the impending doom of the city and the Temple: "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." But Jesus, too, offers a word of hope: "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

We, too, live in anxious times. To begin with, there's the anxiety of the approaching holiday. There are Christmas cards to get out, Christmas baking to be done, gifts to be purchased and mailed to far-flung family, parties to attend. It is the busiest time of the year and we plunge into it with the added burden of keeping our Christmas cheer intact. It's really a rather grim task, as witnessed by the ominous words we teach our children under the guise of a happy song: "You'd better watch out! You'd better not cry! You'd better not pout, I'm telling you why!"

No, all kidding aside, we do live in anxious times. Will the economy stay strong or will rising oil prices lead to runaway inflation or recession? Will anyone we love be sent to serve in Iraq? Will that increasingly nasty civil war escalate into a regional conflict, perhaps even World War III? Will terrorists again bring war's destruction home to America? And can we keep from destroying ourselves? Is the nearly unassailable fact of global warming something we have the knowledge and will to reverse, or has our planet begun the slow spiral of decline into disaster? These are dangerous, anxious times.

In the midst of all this existential dread, some Christians become militant. “God’s gonna wipe it all out and start again,” they cry, “and we’re gonna be on the winning side! God’s gonna swoop down and scoop us out of all this mess and we’re gonna go to Paradise while all the sinners get what’s comin’ to ’em.” To put it bluntly, those brothers and sisters have got it all wrong. God is not the destroyer; humankind is. I invite you to go back and read carefully what Jesus says in Luke 21 or in Mark 13, which is likely the older record of Jesus’ words. Nowhere does Jesus say that God will send this destruction. It is human armies that are responsible for the terror, human ambitions and human greed. Can we doubt, knowing the history of millennia of human warfare and the specter of nuclear war, that humankind is perfectly capable of destructive forces that rival earthquakes, that bring famines and plagues? Just as Luke’s audience believed that signs in the stars and heavenly bodies foretold earthly consequences, we know that the great powers in our lives, governments, economies and coalitions, can wreak havoc in our lives from afar. The Jews were afraid of the sea because for them it symbolized chaos. We, too, fear chaos, and now we suspect that our own thoughtless and selfish actions have contributed to the roaring of the sea and the waves as global warming apparently ratchets up the frequency and strength of hurricanes.

Jeremiah believed that God would be faithful in bringing restoration to Jerusalem and, indeed, it was so. Jesus told his disciples that, even at the worst of times, they would be able to stand and raise their heads high, because even in crisis, their God was near. All they, and we, have to do in that time of trouble, is to keep alert for the presence and grace of God. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life,” is the way the New Revised Standard Version puts it. It is a typical of Luke’s presentation of the Jesus story that there be a warning to the rich, for only the rich in first century Palestine could afford dissipation and drunkenness. For the average peasant, simply having enough to stay alive was plenty of worry in life. Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of this passage in The Message brings this verse to home for us. “But be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping.” As Lutheran pastor Paul Nuechterlein remarks in his commentary on this passage, “Can you think of any contrast more sharp than this verse when it comes to how Advent is observed in our culture? “Parties and drinking and shopping” are a rather precise description of the activities hailed as most essential. Jesus warns against such things as activities that dull our anticipation of the times when we most need God's inbreaking of a different way to be in this world, the inbreaking of God's very different culture, (God's) ‘kingdom.’”

That inbreaking of God’s kingdom comes to give us power and hope in the midst of anxious times. Always, always, God is faithful. The former moderator of the Presbyterian Church, USA, Rev. Dr. Susan Andrews writes, “Bad things happen. In fact, bad things happen to good people. In an unfinished world, a world of sin, a world of free will and selfish living and power politics, bad things happen to good people. Earthquakes happen, terrorism happens, wars and famine happen, towers fall and babies die and cancer kills, but bad things are never the final word.” God is faithful. The good news is that we do not need to be faithful to trigger God’s faithfulness. God is faithful and God is gracious. God’s faithfulness is not dependent on any action from us. It is God’s gift to us. But because God is faithful, because God brings and fulfills hope in our anxious times, we have the hope and power to be faithful in grateful return.

I, for one, do not hope for that millennialist rapture and tribulation that has been so popular in certain strains of American Christianity for the last two centuries. During this season of Advent, I would not follow the example of William Miller, the founder of the Adventist movement, who was so convinced that Christ would return in 1844 that he convinced thousands of people to quit their jobs, sell their homes and join him in waiting for the blessed day. I tend to be more of the mind of Martin Luther who, when asked what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow, said, "I would plant a tree." Our hope-filled task, as the Body of Christ on earth, waiting for the second advent of Christ the King, is to continue the work of Christ here on earth, to replenish the earth and to nurture God's people. There is a well-known story of an unexpected solar eclipse during the colonial period in America. It happened that the colonial legislature of Connecticut was meeting at the time and panic seized the assembly. One frantic member moved to adjourn so that all could pray and prepare for the end of the world. In the rapidly and seemingly preternaturally darkening room, another legislator stood and said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let candles be brought."

We have brought our candles this morning, lit our single candle rather than curse the darkness. We act in the sure and certain hope that the resurrection has altered the nature of our world forever; that the powers of death and violence have failed, that God is in control. Jesus came to teach us that no power is greater than the power of God. We need not fear, for the future is God's. No matter how anxious our times are, no matter what the transient reality of life brings us, we act in the faithful hope that we can stand and raise our heads, because our redemption is near. Looking back at 27 years of imprisonment and a lifetime of hardship for his people, Nelson Mandela wrote in his autobiography: "I have found that one can bear the unbearable if one can keep spirits strong even when the body is being tested. Strong convictions are the secret of surviving deprivation. Your spirit can be full even when your stomach is empty. I always knew that some day I would once again feel the grass under my feet and walk in the sunshine as a free man. I am fundamentally an optimist. Part of being an optimist is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward." Nelson Mandela stood and raised up his head in the hope that his redemption was near and so helped bring freedom to his people.

Another great leader of downtrodden people in the twentieth century and, as I never tire of reminding people, a fellow Baptist pastor, preached hope in the midst of anxious times. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word." Is there a better summation of the Good News of Christ Jesus, who came, as we heard last Sunday, to be a witness to the truth, rejected violence and loves without ceasing? The key to our hope, in anxious times or at any time, is love — God's unconditional love for us and our loving response to God and our neighbors. Yet another great man of God wrote to a people living in anxious times. Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica was written to a group of Christians who were being persecuted for their faith, unsure of the fate of those who had died, desperate for a word of hope. Paul wrote, "may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." The holiness that makes us blameless before our Father is that love for one another and for all that we have as a gift from God. We can hope in these anxious times because God loves us so that we may love each other. In the presence of such love, we can

Hope in Anxious Times

celebrate our greatest hope: Christians all, our Lord is coming! So let us lift up our heads! Look up! Look up! For our redemption is near! Thanks be to God!