

1 Advent – Year C – November 29, 2009
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36
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I have a question to start our thoughts for today. How does James Bond take his martinis? Anyone? And the answer is, of course, shaken, not stirred. Whoever our favorite actor might be for the character of James Bond, we can basically guarantee a similar plot line for each Bond movie, along with exotic vistas from a spectacular array of foreign locales. After much struggle and strife, great danger, gratuitous violence, and the assistance of at least one beautiful woman, our hero wins the day, rescuing the world from the brink of cataclysmic disaster and insatiable greed. The bad guys will inevitably get what's coming to them, despite appearances to the contrary. Happy new year and welcome to the season of Advent, where we will all be shaken up **and** stirred, spend a while in lonely exile, but hold on to the promise that God's righteousness will prevail. That the promise will be fulfilled with the help of a humble handmaid called Mary, a call to prepare the way and repent by the prophet John the Baptist, and the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We couldn't have a better start to the Advent season than this morning's reading from the prophet Jeremiah. As Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes, "It is the fate of any true prophet to be at war with his times. When the [Israelites] are affluent and spiritually debased, Jeremiah denounces them. When the people simplistically decide to join a revolt against the vastly superior army [of the Babylonians], Jeremiah mocks them. But when the [people] lose everything, and are overtaken by despair, the normally morose Jeremiah turns into a prophet of hope." Since the time of Martin Luther, chapters 30 to 33 of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah have been known as the 'Little Book of Comfort'. Today's reading is a slice of hope in the midst of terrible despair.

Despair is a common human condition. Can any of us honestly say that we have never experienced at least momentary periods of abject hopelessness, even if our faith in the Lord is generally strong? Abrupt or violent changes in our circumstances seriously shake us to the core of our being, and we want to know what on earth God is up to, and what on earth we have done to deserve such wretched treatment or abandonment. Despite ignoring Jeremiah's prophesies that is precisely what has happened to Jerusalem and the people of the kingdom of Judah. The Babylonian army has crushed them utterly, burnt Jerusalem to the ground, and sent the Jewish leaders into exile. The story of the Babylonian exile inspired Psalm 137:1-5, where we read, "By the rivers of Babylon-- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

In his writings, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, associates despair with our failed attempts to provide security for ourselves. The absence of hope marks a retreat into self so deep that we can no longer experience God's presence, or even imagine God's promise of an alternative future. Enter God's prophetic voice in the person of Jeremiah, sent to a people in exile. Jeremiah speaks a message of comfort, hope and restoration. His words tell of God's promise of a king in the line of David, who shall reign with justice and righteousness. The promise goes even further, offering safety and security, and a time when the children of the promise are given a new name: "The Lord is our righteousness."

In the midst of our abundance, we may not find it easy to relate to exile. So it may help us to be reminded of the purpose of the first great exile of God's people, which is the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Moses led the Exodus, and God instructed him to tell Pharaoh the reason that the Israelites were to be released. From Exodus 7, Moses says, "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, 'Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.'" After Pharaoh refuses to abide by God's command, Moses returns and tells him no less than six times that God desires freedom for the Israelites so that they may worship the Lord their God. In fact, worshiping God is so important that it becomes the basis for the first two of

the Ten Commandments. Similarly, Jesus reiterates the importance of worshipping God in response to Satan's temptations during His own wilderness experience. Our time in exile helps to distance us from the ways of the world, so that we might be prepared in body, mind, and spirit to worship the Lord our God. The fruit of worship is that it aligns our hearts and minds to God's will, and strengthens us to do God's work of mission and ministry. Given the tidal wave of the worst of popular culture at this time of year, now is an excellent time to say, "No" and to realign our wills with God's will. Without the fundamental preparation of the Exodus experience where a whole nation learned its dependence on God alone, could the Israelites have ever hoped to be the nation that bears the light of God into the world? Without the formative experience of exile, can you and I ever hope to be prepared to carry on the mission of Jesus Christ to a largely indifferent world?

Throughout this period of preparation and transition, we are called to hold on to the hope of the promise, and to trust in God's steadfast love and deliverance from all suffering. The promise, literally "the good word" is not generic or one of several promises, it is particular and explicit. The good word will bear the characteristics and qualities of God, as promised in the covenant with Moses: namely justice and righteousness. As well being the bringer of peace and security. In the Mosaic covenant, God's justice is defined as an egalitarian society, and especially God's acts in defense of the poor, the widow, and orphans. In other words, God's steadfast love and care for the most vulnerable in society, those who live on the precipitous and brutally sharp edges of mainstream culture. Coupled with justice is righteousness. Righteousness is not an attitude or a standard, but action in accord with God's purposes and God's will. It is about living in right relationship with God and living towards others in just and loving relationships. Jesus Christ is our good word and the model of all justice and righteousness. God has promised that there will be a reign of peace, and that we will be given a new name.

Naming is a significant act in the Hebrew Scriptures, and in our lives as Christians. Theologically, a new name does not just mean a new identity, but a radical new reality. James Bond, code name double oh seven has got nothing on the veracity of this truth! Remember that when we are baptized we are named before God, baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, sealed, and named as Christ's own forever. Becoming part of the Body of Christ is not just a new identity, but also a radical new reality. We are clothed in righteousness, freed from sin and death, and are bearers of the hope and promise of salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord. And what is that promised new name? Actually, it was, it is and will be for us a confession of faith, personified in all God's children that "The Lord is our righteousness". We are not there yet, but the Holy Spirit is working on us!

Advent is here. We have entered our own period of exile to reflect on the meaning of the wilderness, to journey to a new place and new promise, and to prepare for Our Savior's coming. Can we be shaken out of our habits enough to resist the temptation to worship other gods, like the gods of consumerism or overwork, which so easily lead us to financial and spiritual bankruptcy, and emotional and physical exhaustion? We will find ourselves in strange new places. Do we have the humility to renounce our presumptuous attitudes and imaginary worlds in order to accept God's graceful provision for all our needs, despite the secular pressures of this season? Are you and I willing to continue God's work, living at odds with the world in a prophetic countenance that reflects God's justice and righteousness? Rabbi Tarfon said, "It is not our obligation to complete the work of perfecting the world, but we are not free to desist from it either." Today we begin anew and our work is to prepare ourselves to be filled with the hope of the good word, and to be equipped by God's grace in justice and righteousness for the work of ministry. There is no better time to be shaken and stirred!

Amen.