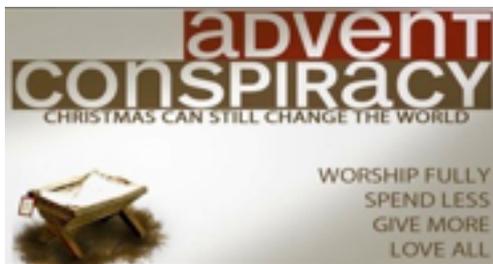


# Hope in a Hope-Less World

## Jeremiah 33:14-16

Happy New Year! Christians have a head start on the rest of the world when it comes to getting ready for 2016. But we don't jump straight in to the action. Instead, we pause. As the calendar rushes to its climax, we stop to catch our breath, to take our spiritual pulse.

Advent starts today. The year has gone so quickly, and the pace only speeds up as we run toward the finish line of December 31. But what we need most is to slow down, to



reflect, to repent of all that we've done this year that hasn't been in line with God's heart for us, and to again place ourselves in the grand story of God's unfolding plan to reconcile the whole universe to himself through his Son Jesus.

The key word on this first Sunday in Advent is hope. As you cast your mind over the last year, are you more filled

with hope or less hope-full than the year before? Is that because of the situation in your personal life? Or the bigger picture: this city, this country, the global environment? There are plenty of hard things: climate change, terrorism, war; and in our country natural disasters, a hardening of our nation's heart, symbolised by violent street protests like the one we saw in Melton last weekend. Is there reason for hope,

or fear?



Happy New Year? I'm not sure. I think each one of us is weighed down by the war in Syria, and the way that this obscene, multi-pronged conflict has released a torrent of refugees, and spawned ISIS led acts of terror across the world, most recently in Paris and Mali. I would hazard a guess that we feel less secure now than one year ago.

But I want to take you

back to the Middle East, some 2700 years. The more things change, the more they stay the same, we might say. Even back then, this region was fertile ground for war. The city of Jerusalem, whose name means "foundation of peace", was besieged by the army of the mighty Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar. And God's prophet, Jeremiah was also under siege, imprisoned in



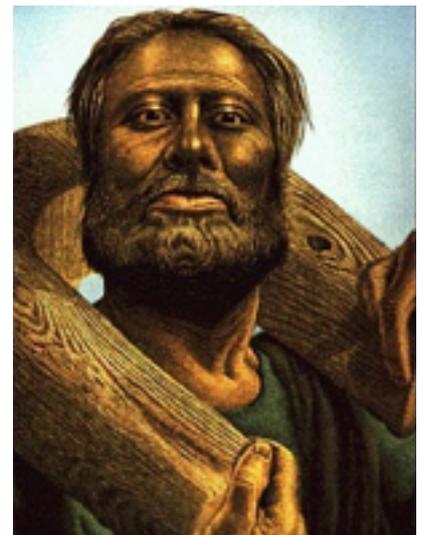
King Zedekiah's palace for speaking God's mind. It wasn't good news- God had given him the task of announcing to the nation of Judah that God could no longer ignore the sins of his people. Time and again they had broken his covenant. Now God has acted. Obliteration.

The Babylonian army breached the city wall. Jerusalem fell. Zedekiah was taken prisoner. He had to watch his family executed before his eyes, before he was blinded, bound in fetters and taken to Babylon, along with most of the city. Only a few people were left behind, and all of them poor, to tend the fields and vineyards. Had God's covenant love been completely extinguished by their rebellion? Would they suffer his absence in exile for ever? Where was God now?

You might have asked yourself the very same question, even in this last year. You may have felt spiritually parched, emotionally wrung out, physically worn out, even sick. You may have asked some of these questions:

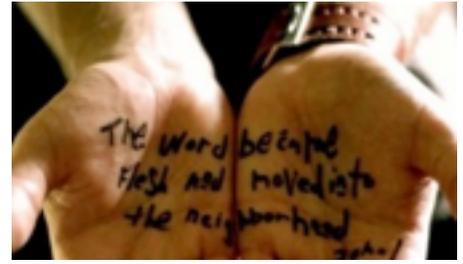
- Where are you God in my life at the moment? I can't feel your love or your presence. God, I'm scared of falling away from you.
- God, I'm struggling with my relationship with my husband/my wife/my children/my friend. I don't know whether we can keep it together.
- God, I can't get over this death. It keeps haunting me. I can't see why you let it happen.
- God, I've prayed for my kids ever since they were born, and look how far away they are from you right now. Why have you let this happen to me?
- God, I'm sick of being sick. Why won't you let me get well? What about your promises that you work for good for those who love you?

In the middle of these very real and painful questions, it's hard to see a way forward. Jeremiah knew all about this: he had been imprisoned, placed in stocks, verbally abused, and thrown into a muddy well. His suffering was a parable of what was going to happen to his people. But, even in the middle of this pain and chaos, there was hope. At the height of Babylonian siege, Jeremiah goes and buys a field from his cousin. There didn't appear to be any future, but God told Jeremiah to go ahead anyway.



This sign of hope and a future found its source in the promise that God makes through Jeremiah today: "I will make a righteous branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land." Consider the facts. The House of David lay in ruins. There was no king, and Zedekiah's family had all been killed. Yet But God breathed new life into their dire situation with the promise of one who would rule as king. Unlike the disobedient kings that ruled over Israel and Judah, this king would rule with the wisdom and heart of God. He would not lead his people astray by promoting the worship of false gods. He wouldn't use his position to amass wealth for himself while his people starve. God will not leave his people in the grip of captivity. He will be faithful beyond belief. He will commit himself to his people. There will be hope, and a future.

One day some 700 years after these words, a child was born in the backwater of Bethlehem. God's promise bore the fruit of one born to be this king. He, too, lives in a strife torn land, where Rome rules with an iron fist, but he acts justly and lives rightly before God. For all this, he suffers the death of a criminal. But even in death, he express hope and trust in his God and Father. And this king, Jesus, is the one who is victorious. "The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed," we read in John's Revelation. This shoo, planted in this place and time, will never wither. He will continue to bear fruit. Through his just and right life he brings life to many others. Life that is his gift, life that is real and robust, life that will transcend death. A life of hope and a future.



It seemed impossible to God's people in Jeremiah's time that hope could sprout from the ruins. It may seem impossible to us also, as we lament the bad choices we make and the circumstances that we face in life. We wonder how God can make something good from our life's experience, out of our humanity. But while repentance forces us to look inside, hope in God means looking up to Jesus- seeing the cross on which he died, the empty tomb which announces his new life, and the Pentecost gift of the Holy Spirit, bring Jesus' life to each of us, as the Spirit has done today in Job's life through his baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jeremiah says, "In those days Judah will be saved and all Jerusalem will live in safety." This promise is, first of all, directed to the church, the New Israel, people who have been called by God to live in obedience to his will. We are God's new covenant people. The Jerusalem we see today is anything but safe. But we, the new Israel, are kept eternally secure, peaceful and fulfilled through Christ. Our lives track with Jesus' life, to life without end.



But this hope is not just other-worldly. It's not just about escaping this life and scraping into heaven. Hope is grounded in this life too. "This is the name by which it will be called, 'The Lord our Righteous Saviour.'" This is how it was for Jeremiah. What a gesture of hope it was to buy a field when the city was under attack, or to tell the exiles in Babylon; "Build houses, settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile."



This sounds to me like the choices that confront our congregation at the moment. Learning how to live as people who are right and just in our local communities, both here where our church is, and where our homes and workplaces are. That's why I'm excited about the initiative we've called The Bridge, in which we open this building up to those who are new to Australia, getting to know them, teaching them conversational English, letting them know of the reason for the hope that we have. Come to St

Paul's this Thursday night at 6.00pm if you want to know how you can be involved as we launch next year.

And then there's the bigger question. What's the future of our church plant, our presence in Box Hill? How do we "seek the peace and prosperity" of this city? How can we serve this community as a sanctuary, a place where they can be refreshed with the water of life? These are some of the questions raised at our Special General Meeting last week.

Live with hope from day to day. Be a source of hope for others. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. Amen.