

Hope Lost, Hope Restored
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

Brothers and Sisters – are you ready for Christmas?

It is December 2nd and we are beginning to see the signs that the Christmas season is upon us.

Businesses and stores have put up their decorations and displays. Santa's Village and the giant Reindeer have been set-up in the Chinook Mall. Christmas lights twinkle and sparkle on homes and businesses when it gets dark outside.

We hear Christmas music being played at the beginning of the service... in the stores, and in the coffee shops; Pumpkin Spice Lattes have given way to Peppermint Mochas and Eggnog Cappuccinos and Hot apple Cider.

Christmas Markets and Craft shows have descended upon the week-ends, offering a myriad of artisan options to those seeking that perfect one-of-a-kind gift for the person who has it all...

And the Advertising and Marketing industries are in overdrive to make sure that we know... there are only 22 shopping days left until Christmas!!

We can see the signs all around us; the Christmas season has begun - and like it or not... it means we need to get ready for Christmas.

And for most people this means we need to get out the Christmas decorations, set up the Christmas tree, do our Christmas shopping, send Christmas cards, and plan our Christmas holidays and organize our Christmas celebrations... have I left anything out??

It is a very busy time of the year for us with all that goes on to celebrate the first coming of Jesus Christ into this world.

And the irony in all the signs and preparation activity of the season is that it can, as Luke 21:34 says *“weigh our hearts down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life.”*

And while we may end up celebrating the Holiday season – we actually miss out on celebrating the first coming of Christ.

And before we “tsk-tsk” all that foolishness of getting so caught up in celebrating the holidays that we miss Christmas, we would do well to ask why this happens so easily to us?

The answers to this, brothers and sisters, are alluded to in the scripture passages that we read this morning from the prophet Jeremiah and from the gospel of Luke. Now at first glance I know that these passages seem to be a strange choice to begin our December series on Preparing for Christ’s Arrival.

But stick with me for a bit, and you will see why these passages have been chosen and used by the Church for many years, to help Christians prepare for the arrival of Christ.

And in the first line of our reading from Jeremiah 33, in verse 14, we hear about a promise, a good promise, which Yahweh had made to the people of Israel and Judah.

And because it is God’s covenant name that is used in this verse (LORD = Yahweh), we know this promise refers to the Covenant of Promise which was made with Abraham. Now we’ve gone over each of the major covenants in the scriptures a few times here at Valleyview – so this is a test to see if you can remember what the Covenant of Promise was about.

Now if you were thinking; Yahweh had promised to bless Abraham and bless those who blessed him – so that he would become a great nation, with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky or sand on the seashore you’re correct.

And if you were also thinking; Yahweh promised land to Abraham’s descendants you are also correct.

And if you remembered that Yahweh had told Abraham that his descendants would not receive this land right away... but would first experience a period of enslavement and mistreatment in a foreign land before Yahweh would deliver them and bring them to the promised land – then you get bonus points!

And right here brothers and sisters is where we find the answer to why our hearts are so easily distracted and consumed by celebrating the holiday season.

You see... when we have to wait for God's promises to be fulfilled – we lose hope. When our circumstances do not point toward the fulfillment of God's promises – we lose hope.

And I think we can take this a bit further and say that when life does not turn out as we expected it to – we lose hope.

And when we lose hope life becomes mundane and tedious. It feels like we are enslaved and held captive, going nowhere – so we are vulnerable to “*carousing (partying) and drunkenness*” or other variations of this, because they seem exciting and offer us the promise of an escape.

So ‘celebrating the holidays’ offers us the promise of hope because we’ll feel like life is good, and that everything is alright in the world, and that maybe things could turn out just like they do in the Hallmark Christmas movies – but it is a false

hope because we all know the reality that sets in after the holiday season is done, don’t we.

So brothers and sisters, we need this reminder as we see the signs of the season around us – not only to help us avoid chasing futile promises of hope in holiday celebrations, but more importantly so that we will not miss the real purpose of celebrating the first coming of Christ.

Now, Luke 21:34 -36 warns us that getting weighed down with the anxieties of life will cause us to be unprepared for the arrival of Christ when He returns to bring in the Kingdom of God – and that brothers and sisters is what we truly need to be getting prepared for in these next few weeks.

Advent is all about preparing ourselves to look ahead and get ready for the second coming of Christ by looking back and remembering the first coming of Christ. Do you follow?

Let me say it this way – while there are many significant aspects to the birth of Jesus Christ; God becoming human; the

expression and definition it gives to God's love for the world; the Word's willingness to leave His heavenly glory and serve us in humility and so on...

The most important and most overlooked part of the birth of Christ is that it points us forward to the return of Christ – and hearing and understanding and believing how this happens is a means by which the Holy Spirit will work to restore any Hope which we have lost.

Because we are not the first people to struggle with losing hope are we?

The scripture passage we read from Jeremiah was first written for God's people while they were under siege in Jerusalem, their king was defeated and captured, and they were being taken away from the Promised Land as captives by the Babylonians. Hope lost.

Now, if you are familiar with the story of Israel and Judah you will know... these events were the consequences which God's

people had brought upon themselves through continual idol worship, sexual immorality and social injustice – all of which were expressions of covenant unfaithfulness to Yahweh.

And so this encourages us to acknowledge – in preparation for Christ's arrival – that we may have lost hope in our lives because we may have had unrealistic expectations for our life, or we have pursued immoral, idolatrous, or unjust paths and have been unfaithful to Yahweh in our life and we are experiencing the consequences of that.

Whatever it may be brothers and sisters our preparations need to start with the bare reality of why we have lost hope, and then on that blank canvas – cleared from the sentimentality and nostalgia of the holidays and their temporary promises – we can receive Yahweh's promise.

In Jeremiah 33:14-15 and Yahweh makes another promise about His previous promise. He says *"in those days and at that time... I will fulfill!"* He promises to fulfill His promises. He assures us that He will fulfill His promises.

For the nation of Israel and Judah this referred to the time when Yahweh would bring them out of captivity once again and allow them to return to the Promised Land, and when this occurred Yahweh was going to “*cause a righteous branch to sprout from David’s line*” (vs. 15)

So – in 539 BC by order of Cyrus the Great – the Jews were allowed to return their promised land and rebuild their cities and Jerusalem and the Temple. You can read all about this in the book of Nehemiah, and it’s good to read about the instances where God fulfills His promises – because we are encouraged and we learn about how God does this.

And one of the things we will notice... is that God fulfills some parts of His promises but not other parts. In this case when the Jews came back to settle and rebuild they were still under the rule of the Persian Empire, they did not have their political sovereignty restored – there was no righteous branch from David’s line that was raised up to rule as King of the Jews at time.

Eventually the Persian Empire fell to the Alexander the Great, and his successors ruled over the Jews and viciously persecuted them.

This sparked the Maccabean revolt and the Jews regained their political independence and once again had their own King ruling over them. (*This is what Jews celebrate in Hanukkah over the holiday season.*) But these Hasmonean Kings were not from the line of David... so this was not the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises either.

Eventually the Hasmonean Kings fell to the power of Rome and the Jewish people and Judea became just another province of the Roman Empire, and the promise of a righteous branch was just another unfulfilled promise in scripture.

But then... in the midst of a period of peace and prosperity which historians call the Pax-Romana, the Peace of Rome, in those days and at that time Yahweh did cause “*a righteous branch to sprout from the line of David.*”

Now – we know, with the benefit of hindsight, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, along with the witness of the Apostles and the testimony of the Holy Scriptures that this righteous branch that sprouted from the line of David was none other than Jesus Christ.

But brothers and sisters, we need to understand that many people during that time and in those days missed the first coming of Christ and what it meant.

Yahweh's delay in fulfilling that portion of His promise, which they had come understand as political independence, had caused them to lose hope, and become weighed down with the anxieties of life under foreign rule.

And I think we can understand this – because there are times in our Christian life when we lose hope not because we are being unfaithful to Yahweh, but because we are waiting for Him to fulfill a promise that He gave to us and it's not happening, or it looks like it might be happening, but those

events don't quite work out to bring about the fulfillment of the promise... and we start to lose hope.

And large part of why we lose hope when a promise is delayed friends, is because we're expecting God's promise to be a miracle and meet some immediate need in our lives.

Now there is nothing wrong with miracles – but they are not promises.

Miracles are short term interventions that we need because of the consequences of carousing or drunkenness or to alleviate the anxieties of our life, legitimately so I might add. But they are different from God's Promises in that don't really bring about any significant changes in our lives or in this world.

Think about all the miracles that God did for Israel through Moses, think about all the miracles God did for them through the Prophets, think about all the miracles God did among them through Jesus - and yet for all the miracles they missed

recognizing how God was fulfilling His Promises in and through Jesus and what that meant.

And this is the real danger when we lose hope... that we will miss the more significant ways in which Yahweh is going to fulfill those promises in our lives that are delayed. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Brothers and sisters when a promise is delayed it means Yahweh is weaving it and you into His larger plans for His Kingdom in ways that you don't yet understand.

Who among the Jews returning from exile would have realized and understood that the delay in the promise of a Davidic King was in fact leading to the defining moment and action in which God was going to bring about the renewal and restoration of the entire creation in the birth of Jesus Christ!

So you see brothers and sisters, a Promise delayed is only building interest and gaining value – in Kingdom ways that we can't even begin to see the full significance of right now.

In fact if we are completely honest about “God’s promises” in scripture, they always take a loooong time to be fulfilled – but they always bring about the most significant events that change the course of redemptive history and where this world is ultimately headed – so why would it be any different for our lives?

That's why Yahweh uses the metaphor of a branch sprouting to describe His promise of a Davidic King in Jeremiah 33. Time is required for something like that to happen and all that Yahweh intends it to eventually become – It's not instantaneous.

All this is to say brothers and sisters, we don't have to lose hope when we experience a delay in Yahweh fulfilling a promise – but in fact, because we understand how Promises work and how they are different from miracles, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, that delay can actually restore hope and produce anticipation!

Both for the individual promises that we are given about Yahweh's purposes and plans for our lives – and also for final and most important promise that Yahweh has yet to fulfill – sending Jesus Christ back into this world to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

The first coming of Jesus Christ, His birth and ministry and death and resurrection established the Kingdom of Heaven on earth in principle – the second coming of Jesus Christ will complete the Kingdom of Heaven on earth in actuality.

So do you understand now why preparing for Christmas is actually preparing for the return of Christ?

Now – this would all make a lot more sense for us IF we were much more focused on waiting for and anticipating the return of Jesus Christ.

But the truth is that we are far more like the absent minded husband who does not heed signs that the Christmas season is

upon us and the warnings about how many shopping days are left until Christmas.

He figures he has plenty of time to go shopping, he'll get to it eventually and he just carries with his regular business. But time sneaks up on him and suddenly he notices the shopping days are up! He hasn't taken the time to find a suitable gift for his wife and now on Christmas Eve the only store open is the Petro-Canada gas station and he hoping that his wife will appreciate a new ultra-deluxe windshield scraper and some lavender scented air fresheners for her car!

Brothers and sisters we need to pay attention to the signs of the season that point to the return of Christ so that we are not caught unprepared for His arrival.

Isn't it ironic that we work so hard to prepare for celebrating His first coming, and how we anticipate that Christmas will allow us to put aside our differences, show charity and goodwill toward all men...

How will we give gifts to others to show our love during this time and extend grace and mercy and forgiveness to those who don't deserve it – because... it's Christmas.

And why is it all the more terrible that people should lose jobs right before Christmas, or that accidents, deaths and natural disasters are more tragic when they occur close to Christmas?

It's ironic brothers and sisters – because Christ's first coming foreshadows his second coming when all those good things we experience at Christmas that we think are part of the past will become a permanent future - and all the terrible things that are wrong with the world, and ourselves right now... will no longer exist!

The second coming of Christ is our ultimate Hope!

So why do we avoid it and barely talk about it and roll our eyes at those who try to encourage us to anticipate it? In part I think because it's been so long in coming that we've lost our hope in it... and also because we are scared of it.

Jesus' words in Luke 21:25-26 are unsettling *"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken."*

But we are so unsettled by this that we don't really hear his next words in vs. 27-28 *"At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

Brothers and sisters – for those who have responded in faith to the forgiveness and grace and mercy that Jesus offers to us in his first coming as our savior from sin – his second coming as the Judge of nature and nations holds no fear or threat!

Instead it is when we will be vindicated before all those who have doubted, persecuted, mocked and scorned us for putting our faith and trust in Jesus Christ – it is our Hope!

Now we don't know when Yahweh will fulfill His final promise – we do not have a countdown of how many shopping days are left until Jesus returns – but Jesus did tell us that we can look around us and see the signs of the season, as we can tell by the trees budding when spring time is on the way.

And it's the very things in nature which terrify other people because they don't really know what is going on, and it appears our planet and life as we know it will be destroyed (sound familiar to anyone) which actually indicate to us that Christ's return, our Hope, is getting closer and closer.

Every day that goes by, every year that passes, is a day and a year closer to that time when God will fulfill His last promise.

As we learned from the period of time leading up to Christ's first coming – those circumstances then did not at all look like God was going to bring about "*a righteous branch from the line of David*" But after the fact, it becomes clearly obvious how did exactly that.

In the same way the circumstances in our world – in nature and among nations – do not appear to indicate in any way that the Kingdom of God is getting closer and closer, if anything it makes it appear farther and farther away.

But don't let that fool you – Jesus tells us that these are the very signs of the season when we can anticipating his return.

So be encouraged brothers and sisters – this is the season of preparing for the arrival of Jesus Christ. We can see the signs – and for us it is a season of hope and anticipation of better things to come in the Kingdom of Heaven.

So may we be found ready and waiting and standing up in expectation and Hope at the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christmas is coming brothers and sisters – are you ready?
Come quickly Lord Jesus Come soon!

Amen.