

November 29, 2009, The First Sunday of Advent  
Luke 1: 68-79  
Jeremiah 33:14-16

The Lord is our Righteousness

Back in the day, in about 600 BC, when Jeremiah was alive and prophesying, it was a very hard time. Israel was attacked by the Babylonians, who eventually overran Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and took the people into captivity, into exile in Babylon. Losing their country and their Temple was bad enough, but how could the Jewish people worship God in a foreign land?

Their religion, their society, was focused on the Holy Land of Israel, the Holy City of Jerusalem, the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple as God's permanent dwelling place, so how could they worship God in Babylon, outside of Jerusalem, without the Temple?

How could they maintain their relationship with their creator and uphold their end of the covenant that Abraham had made with God when they were taken away from their homes in Israel?

More than that, how could they maintain their end of that covenant when it seemed like God had not kept **his** side of it, had not kept a king of David's line on the throne, had not protected his people in the land which he had given them?

What, exactly, had happened to That Promise, the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey? The promise that a king of David's line would sit on the throne of Israel forever?



And the time when Jesus was born six centuries later was not a whole lot better. By that time the people had long since come home from Exile in Babylon, the Temple had been rebuilt, but Israel was ruled once again by foreign powers.

In addition, the people still struggled to have a good relationship with God. They still asked “where was God when bad things were happening to them?”

Two groups tried to answer that problem.

The Sadducees were a group of priests who tried to maintain their relationship with God by keeping their distinct Jewish identity, culture, and religion untainted by the cultures and religions of the other people around them.

They reminisced about the glory days when they were in charge of their own country and they felt that if only things could be the way they used to be, then their relationship with God would be the way it used to be.

The Pharisees took a different approach. They tried to maintain their relationship with God by keeping themselves pure and holy, by following “the traditions of the elders”, the ancient interpretations of the Law of Moses. They reasoned that if only they could be good enough, if all the people could only be good enough, then God would once again bless them, throw the Romans out of the country, and re-establish the throne of David.

It seems to me that we are the same way today, trying one technique or another to have a good relationship with God.

We may feel far away from God, as if we are in a place where we cannot worship and pray and know that God is with us. Things are different from the way they used to be. Too much has changed, and we can't quite relate to God the way we used to, the way we want to.

Sometimes the world can feel like a place we don't know and where we don't want to be.

We want to go back to a time when there was not so much sex and violence on tv and in the movies, to a time when people watched their language and their behavior, when it seemed that natural disasters did not strike quite as often, and when fewer tragedies in general seemed to affect us. We ask ourselves "where is God when bad stuff is happening, not only to us, but just in general, to everyone?"

Things get worse and worse every day, it seems.

Sometimes it's tempting to just give up and go be a hermit out in the desert, or hole up in a cabin in the mountains, safe and pure and untouched by the degradation of the world.

How can we hear the voice of God and see the beauty of the Lord when there is so much noise and ugliness around us? How can we be God's people in the world when the world is trying so hard to confuse us and pull us away from being the people we were created to be? How and where can we find God?

When all seems hopeless, how do we find hope? How do we believe that God still cares, is still with us?

Jeremiah found reason to hope, and so did Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, who spoke the words we read from the gospel according to Luke this morning.

This morning we lit a candle symbolizing hope. And just like Jeremiah and Zechariah, we do have reason to hope.

We find hope here, in this place, where we are reminded of the presence and love and power of God every week. We especially find hope at this time of year, when we are reminded that Jesus Christ came into the world to be the light of the world!

A time when we are preparing to welcome Christ into our lives once again, just in case the world has done too good a job of hiding him, too good a job of making us forget that we are his sisters and brothers,

too good a job of leading us into darkness and exile.

In our passage from Jeremiah, the prophet found reason to hope even in a very dark time. He found it in the promises of God, in a future where God would set everything right by “raising up a righteous Branch” and executing “justice and righteousness in the land”. He finishes by saying, “this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”

It is not clear what will be called by that name, whether it’s the righteous Branch or Jerusalem or Judah, but I think that the statement is significant.

“The Lord is our righteousness.”

Righteousness can have many shades of meaning, and it is used in many ways throughout the Bible. In Genesis we learn that Abraham believed God and that God reckoned that belief to him as righteousness.



In other places it has a more legalistic meaning---doing the right thing, the moral thing.

But many times it refers to maintaining a correct relationship with God or with people, or both.

In our passage from Jeremiah I think the word righteousness can be understood in each of those meanings.

This passage definitely is prophesying the Messiah's coming. The righteous Branch that will be raised up is the Messiah, Jesus. So when we read, "The Lord is our righteousness," we can understand that Christ the Lord is the way that we can come to believe in God. When we know Christ, we know God. Christ told us to "believe in God, believe also in him." In Christ we come to know God and believe.

Christ also enables us to do the right thing, to behave morally, by his example and by the deeper understanding we gain from knowing Christ.

Mostly, though, in my experience, knowing Christ helps us to be in right relationship with God. Until we know Christ we are just guessing what God is like. Until Christ came to live among people we had no way of really understanding what God is like. In Christ we know God in a way that our human minds can understand. With understanding comes a deeper, more appropriate relationship with God.

Christ our Lord enables us to live righteous lives, believing in God, acting morally, and in right relationship with God. Without Christ we cannot accomplish this. With Christ we have physical, tangible reason to believe, we have the strength found in his example of how to live, and we can see how God loves us and wants to be with us.

So----what difference does all this make?

In Jeremiah's time people were losing hope. They had waited a long time for God to fulfill his promises and instead of things getting better, according to the promises, they were quickly getting worse.

In the time before Christ's birth, people were still waiting for the promises to be fulfilled. Waiting and waiting and waiting.

Like a little kid wondering if Christmas was EVER going to get here!

Waiting until you give up believing it will ever happen.

Waiting.

These days I know there are some people who are praying for the End Times to come.

We have movies like “2012” that feed into that interest.

People want to know what the end of the world will be like. Some people think it can't be much worse than what we are experiencing today. There are those who want it to happen, the sooner the better.

They find the hope they are looking for in the idea that the world will be destroyed and need to start fresh, or that Christ will come and destroy evil forever.

I am not saying that Christ's second coming will or will not happen soon. Christ himself said that no one knows the day or the hour except God, so I am not going to make any predictions.

In the meantime, I am not going to pin my hopes on that. To me that seems like passing the buck or giving up. People have waited and waited, speculating, trying to calculate the date, sometimes using it as an excuse to do whatever they want, to abuse the environment and even other people. I don't want to be like that, and then be disappointed when the date passes and nothing happens.

Instead, I want to live as though the reason for hope is already here, as though what I am waiting for has already happened!

As though Christ has already come again!

Because he has! Christ comes into our hearts again and again, as often as we ask, as often as we open the door to our souls in response to his knocking!

The Righteous Branch lives and grows among us. It has sprung up as Jeremiah told us it would, and we know it as Jesus Christ. 600 years later, the father of John the Baptist spoke a prophecy that remembered both the promises and the prophecies of years before----that a mighty savior would be raised up from the house of David. In this raising up of the savior, the righteous branch, God has shown us all mercy and remembered the covenant that he made to Abraham, that through Abraham, a righteous man, all the nations of the world would be blessed and serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness.

That is where our hope lies, not that we have to be good enough to earn God's mercy and grace, but that God's mercy and grace enable us, empower us to be good, to be holy and righteous.

The Lord Jesus Christ is our righteousness. He is the incarnation, the embodiment of God's mercy, grace, and love for us. How else could we live but righteously, knowing that? How else could we live in response to mercy, grace, and love but as righteous men and women of God?

God has raised up a savior for us, for YOU! In response let us strive to live in right relationship with God, walking in hope and acting in righteousness.

Amen!