

Advent 4 (MP-2) (2019)

‘Great expectation’ might well sum up the spirit of the days leading up to Christmas.

This spirit has been building for weeks and even months, especially for children. Remember when you were a child.

Remember the jubilant spirit that was in the air on the last day of school before the Christmas break began.

Remember how you sprawled out on the floor under the Christmas tree feeling those wrapped gifts, trying to figure out what might be in them . . . and yes you could always tell the socks!

Remember Christmas-eve night. It was hard going to sleep, wasn’t it? You tossed and turned as you listened for the hooves of those reindeer on the roof top. You had visions of the toys that would soon be in the living room.

It was indeed a wonderful time of the year, a time of great expectation.

Well – ‘great expectation’ might also sum up the spirit of the Fourth Sunday in Advent.

All four candles on the Advent wreath are lit.

We sing with great earnestness, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” and cry out that God might “ransom captive Israel” (which includes us).

We pray in our Collect: “Raise up thy power, and come among us.”

And, in our readings we find this same spirit of expectation.

Today I wish to focus on our Old Testament reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah.

Here the prophet delivers a grim message of judgment, yet at the same time one brimming over with hope.

Just a brief word of background . . .

Jeremiah prophesied in the period leading up to and following the exile of the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah into Babylon.

His ministry began in 627 BC and spanned 40 years or more.

By human standards, Jeremiah's ministry was not very successful. People didn't listen or heed his warnings. At times, they showed out-and-out hostility towards him.

Indeed, the passage we have heard read this morning was written while he was shut up in jail. Yes. jail! Why was he there?

Well, because his fellow countrymen didn't like the message he was delivering, which, in fact, was not his message but God's message. In response, they did what many do today, they 'shot' the messenger.

In particular, they were cross with him for predicting that the armies of Babylon would be successful. Judah would be conquered. Jerusalem was going to become a waste place. God's people were going into exile.

But, why was this calamity coming upon the chosen nation? Why were the armies of Nebuchadnezzar going to be successful?

Had God grown weak, so weak that He could not bring about deliverance and victory?

No! Jeremiah and the other prophets of the Old Testament speak with one voice on this. It was because of their sin. The fault lay not with God but with themselves.

They had turned and served other gods. Their land was full of idols. They had not cared for the poor. Instead of justice there was injustice throughout the land.

And, now they were reaping the consequences.

God's ultimate purpose and plan, however, was not to wipe them off the planet, but to purify them.

So, on one hand Jeremiah delivers a message of judgment, but on the other, a message of grace.

On the side of grace, the prophet confidently affirms that Yahweh will pardon their sins, will bring healing and health, will stage a return from exile and will raise up a righteous king out of David's line.

In verse 11, the prophet sees the time coming when the streets of a rebuilt Jerusalem will ring with the voice of laughter and singing. ///

Now, fast forward to the time when they found themselves off in Babylon.

During those years, such promises as the ones found in today's passage must have kept ringing in their minds and hearts.

These promises must have fostered hope and a spirit of expectation.

At the moment, the pagans had the upper hand, yet God was pledged to come to their rescue. But when? That was the big question.

Again and again, they must have cried out in words similar to those found in today's Collect:

“Raise up thy power and come among us and save us,” perhaps adding: **“Do it now!”**

If you know your Bible history, you know that God was faithful to His promises. He did not forget His battered and bruised people off in Babylon, just as He had not forgot the Hebrews down in Egypt at an earlier time.

About 70 years after they were taken into captivity, a Persian king by the name of Cyrus issued an edict allowing them to return.

During the years that followed, Jerusalem, including the Temple, was rebuilt. But there was just one problem.

They found themselves back in their own land, but not really free. First this pagan power and then that had rule over them.

More than that, the promised Saviour out of David's line had not appeared.

They were, in some sense, still in exile, albeit, a spiritual one. So, they waited and hoped and prayed.

One can only imagine the excitement they must have felt when John the Baptist came announcing that **the time was now**. The kingdom of God was at hand. The long-awaited Deliver was in their midst.

No wonder so many went out to hear him. preach. In John's Gospel, we are told that the people were in expectation.

But, what about us?

Are we in expectation as yet another Christmas approaches?

Or, have we heard the story so often that we no longer marvel at the thought that God came down at Christmas?

That the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us?

That the 'branch' out of David's line has appeared?

And finally, have we lost hope in Jesus' promise to appear a second time . . . this time to destroy death . . . to wipe away all tears . . . to bring lasting peace and justice to this old sin-tired world.

Do we really believe this? Are we in great expectation this morning? Or is it business as usual?

I don't know what is going on in your life at the moment?

Perhaps you don't know how you are going to pay for Christmas . . . or how you are going to get through the holiday for some other reason.

Perhaps you are concerned about your health or that of a loved one.

Perhaps you have experienced a recent bereavement or tragedy.

Whatever is going on, let me assure you that there is hope . . . just as there was for those captives in far-away Babylon.

How can I say this?

Well, because the One who came 2000 years ago still comes. He comes at the end of the age – yes -- but also at moments of great need in our lives. Indeed, He is never far away.

“Lo, I with you always, even until the age,” Jesus promised the disciple prior to His Ascension. His words still stand.

What we prepare to celebrate later this week is nothing less than *God with us*.

In the person of His Son, the God who put the stars in place, the God who spoke in times past by the prophets, the God who remained faithful even when His people were unfaithful, the God who rescued Israel of old, has come among us.

He has entered our muddle and joined us in our struggle. He knows what you are going through.

This morning He offers you His hand and says, “I am with you.”

Reflect on this thought. Let it encourage you and strengthen you. Be in expectation.

Know God is not finished. His purposes continue to unfold.

He will come and “disperse the gloomy clouds of night,” and death's dark shadows shall be put to flight.”

In the words of Jeremiah: There will once again be heard in the streets the voice of joy, and the voice of gladness.

Allow me to close with the words of another great Advent hymn, this one by Charles Wesley:

Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.

May we seek it in nothing and in no one else.