

READINGS: 12/02/2018 ~ First Sunday of Advent ~ The Sunday on Which the Christian Virtue of Hope Is Celebrated ~ First Sunday in Year 'C' of the Three Year Lectionary Cycle ~ Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36 ~ Communion Sunday.

Justice and Integrity

“In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch, a branch who maintains a right relationship with Me, to be raised up from the line of David who shall bring justice and integrity to the land.” — Jeremiah 33:15.

When the reading from Jeremiah was introduced this was said. “Prophets sometimes get a bad name for they are too often remembered for their condemnations rather than their word of hope. In this passage a prophet speaks a word of hope to the people of Israel.”

It is also true in our society many think a prophet is someone who predicts the future. But the idea that a prophet predicts the future is a secular concept. From a Biblical perspective that is a false notion, despite the seminars you can find out there about Revelation predicting the future.

Foretelling future events was not the job of the Prophets. The job of a prophet is to speak the Word of God, the truth of God.

That having been said, my bet is most of us have had some experience of foretelling, predicting, a premonition. I've had more than a couple. I want to address just one.

In August 1964 I was headed into my senior year of High School. I have always been an avid follower of the news. So on August 4th I was riveted to the TV knowing President Lyndon Baines Johnson was to make an emergency address to the nation.

The President said a Navy destroyer had been attacked by North Vietnamese PT boats. So Johnson asked congress to give the executive the ability to vigorously respond without a declaration of war. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

I was all of sixteen but as I listened I had one reaction. And this is where prophecy or at least premonition might come into play. I immediately realized even though this was the result of something half way around the world, it would in some way effect me directly.

Sure enough, at age 19 I got my draft notice and at 20 I shipped out to Saigon. Now, a lot

happened when I was 19, 20 and 21 over which I had no control, the least of which in a sense was me being in the Army.

Much of what happened in those years made it seem there was little hope left in the world. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy were assassinated. There was a revolution in Czechoslovakia, the so called Prague Spring, but it was squashed.

Lyndon Johnson decided to not run for another term as President. There were riots at the Democratic National Convention.

On the other side of that coin, American Astronauts landed on the moon, the Beatles released the *White Album*, the Who released *Tommy*. The Jets won the Super Blow (while I was still in Vietnam) and the Mets won the World Series right after I came back. But these are more about fun than hope. We often confuse the two— fun and hope. (Slight pause.)

This is found in the Scroll of the Prophet Jeremiah: “In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch, a branch who maintains a right relationship with Me, to be raised up from the line of David who shall bring justice and integrity to the land.”

Those of you who know me real well and know about my sense of humor, know that my sense of humor sometimes even extends to visual humor. About three years before that day in August I described earlier, on my first day of High School— I was 13— my mother literally took me to the door of the house as I prepared to leave. With a tear in her eye she gave me a warm, tight hug and wished me luck. I could not resist.

I walked out the door, did a pratfall down the short front stoop and landed on my butt. Mom screamed. I turned around, looked up at her and said, “You’ve got to watch out. The world is a dangerous place!” I don’t think she ever forgave me for that one.

Despite making that statement in a humorous way I was, of course, right. The world is a dangerous place. How dangerous?

Ask Jeremiah. Again, when this reading was introduced it was said the prophet speaks a word of hope to the people of Israel who seem to be in a hopeless situation, under siege by the armies of Babylon. The world is dangerous. And because of that we sometimes fail to hope. (Slight pause.)

Life is full of coincidences. The Interfaith Council usually meets once a month for

breakfast, a gathering intended to be social, and once a month in the afternoon, a more formal session with a speaker and/or discussion.

Even though the breakfasts are social, at a recent repast the conversation turned serious. We started discussing poverty in rural areas, especially in Chenango County.

The coincidence part of this is the next morning I had breakfast with Jack Salo. Many of you may know Jack, a former director at *Opportunities for Chenango* and of *The Place*.

Currently and for the last 15 years Jack has been the Executive Director of the *Rural Health Network of South Central New York*. Jack has an immense storehouse of knowledge on the topic of poverty in rural areas, especially poverty in Chenango County.

So Jack and I got to talking about poverty. Then I invited him to speak with the Interfaith Council. That session happened just this last week.

Among the items we discussed was the study called A.L.I.C.E.— Alice,— Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. It's an assessment of current economic conditions. The study says 15% of families in Chenango County live below the federal poverty guideline.

Another 30% of families have members who work but still are not making enough to cover their necessary costs. That 30% are the ones at the A.L.I.C.E. levels, families who must make difficult decisions every day about how and where to spend limited resources. Many are just one paycheck or accident/sick day away from financial disaster.

So, that statistic— which means 45% of the families in Chenango County are in poverty or struggling— leaves us with a question. Is this situation hopeless?

Jack Salo says 'no.' This is not hopeless. Jack works at this full time and has what I call a 2 'E' approach. It is a response to any hopelessness that the 45% statistic might evoke. The two "Es" are education and engagement.

In today's world this is a given: education, more than ever before, is a necessity. But engagement is the real key.

Yes, engagement is a part of education. But on top of that people need to be engaged with one another in many ways, on many levels, in order to achieve results.

And yes, engagement is a two way street. But those who profess to practice what Jeremiah calls (quote:) "justice *and* integrity" are responsible to keep the flow of that

street open no matter what happens, no matter what another party does, no matter how another party behaves.

You see, the practice of justice— God’s justice— *is a practice*. Therefore you practice it, you do it, no matter what the circumstances are.

And hence, it is not only about justice. As Jeremiah says, it’s also about integrity. And integrity is about constantly giving, about consistent unity, about the wholeness possible through living in and into a full sense of what the community of God might entail— equity for all people. (Slight pause.)

That brings me back to my pratfall and the observation of a 13 year old. Yes, the world is a dangerous place.

But should we fear the world? Should we fear danger? It’s clear a lot of people today from prelates to pundits to politicians want us to be afraid.

So perhaps we should we hide our heads in the sand because the world is a dangerous place. Or perhaps do nothing because we are afraid.

There is another possibility. It is the one I think Jeremiah’s words of hope recommend. We should accept the challenge with which danger presents us and boldly confront this dangerous world. (Slight pause.)

I believe the words of Jeremiah are about hope because they are an invitation from God to us. They are an invitation to consistently, with integrity, confront a dangerous world. These words are an invitation to practice justice— God’s justice.

And justice never happens in isolation. Justice happens in community. God’s justice is, you see, not about *my* justice. God’s justice is not about *your* justice. God’s justice is about *our* justice, communal justice. And God’s community includes all people. If you exclude someone what you are saying is that individual is not a human. That individual is not God’s child. (Slight pause.)

That leads me to this question. Why is this reading assigned on the First Sunday of Advent, the Sunday on which the Christian virtue of hope is celebrated? (Slight pause.)

For me there is an obvious answer. The birth of the Messiah is about hope. The birth of the Messiah is about confronting the world with action, with hope as did the Messiah.

And yes, the birth of the Messiah is about the hope of God. This hope of God to which we are invited insists the Dominion of God will be seen when we act with one another to confront the reality of tribalism in our dangerous world.

This hope of God to which we are invited insists we need to maintain justice with integrity, with action, with working toward the justice of God. And so, here again we are faced with a question.

Are we willing to work with integrity toward God's justice in this world, God's world, and be filled with hope in so doing no matter what happens? Your call. Amen.

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "In the *New York Times* this week David Brooks had piece titled, *It's Not the Economy, Stupid*. Brooks said the biggest factor in the current sociological, psychological and spiritual decay is a crisis of connection. People are less likely to volunteer, go to church, know their neighbors now than at any time over the past several decades. Why? They have fewer resources to help them ride the creative destruction always present in any type of economic system. [1] Well, it seems to me Jeremiah *would be* predicting the future if we turned that situation around by connecting. After all, that way we would be following the exhortation of the prophet to (quote:) "bring justice and integrity to the land."

BENEDICTION: Let us go in joy and in love and in peace, for our hope is in the one who has made covenant with us. God reigns. Let us go in God's peace. And may the face of God shine upon us; may the peace of Christ rule among us; may the fire of the Spirit burn within us this day and forevermore. Amen.

[1] *NY Times* ~ Opinion ~ It's Not the Economy, Stupid ~ How to conduct economic policy in an age of social collapse. ~ David Brooks ~ Opinion Columnist

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/opinion/american-economy-working-class.html?partner=rss&emc=rss>