

The Lord Is Our Righteousness

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: Four weeks ago we set our clocks back one hour. The note on my calendar said that it was so we could stop saving daylight. It must have worked because it sure gets dark a lot earlier now. Anyway, similarly, today in the Church we set the clocks back – but we do it a whole lot farther. As we enter the season of Advent we mentally lift ourselves out of the present and travel back in time to an era when people were still looking forward to the Savior's coming and to the time when the Lord would accomplish his long promised deliverance of his people. In other words, we go all *Old Testament*. And you know that's got to make me happy.

There's an important reason for doing this. In our worship last Sunday we focused on the Lord's promise of Christ's final return. We heard how at his coming the dead will be raised for judgment, and the cosmos as we know it will come undone. The sun will go dark, the stars fall from the sky. And this world that is our home will be destroyed by fire and the elements that compose it will vanish like smoke. And then when the old order of things has passed away, the Lord will create a new heaven and a new earth, the eternal inheritance for those who are his by faith in Christ.

It sounds *wonderful*. But it also sounds ... what? *Implausible? Surreal? A bit too farfetched?* I mean, c'mon, really? We're supposed to believe that in one fell swoop God is going to whisk away this entire universe and build a new one just like that, lickity-split? The idea lies so far beyond our experience that it's pretty hard to swallow. We're tempted to think that maybe it's meant metaphorically or spiritually or something far less spectacular. To be sure, that's the way it is understood in many of the big mainline liberal protestant (and catholic) churches. They think that we are silly and stupid to take it literally. In fact, they think most of what we believe about the Bible and the promises of God is silly; but more on that later.

The truth is that the Word of God and the promises the Lord has made *are* reliable. We can count on them to be fulfilled *exactly* as God has said. We know because God has always been faithful in the past. He has a long track record of keeping his Word. And so in the season of Advent we go back to what were times a lot like these, when people were looking forward to other promises of God being fulfilled, promises that also seemed to be implausible, surreal, and farfetched; when too the majority of people who claimed to be believers in the one true God doubted his promises and ridiculed and sometimes persecuted those who took the Lord at his Word. In every case we see that the Lord fulfilled his promises, and that the true believers, those who trusted his Word, were vindicated. Thus we know we too will be vindicated.

And that brings us to today's brief Old Testament lesson. It sounds rather upbeat, doesn't it? The Lord declaring that the days are coming when he will fulfill his promise to Israel and the house of Judah to raise up for David a righteous Branch who will execute justice and righteousness in the land. He will save Judah and the people of Jerusalem will dwell securely. If you lived in Jerusalem back then you'd have to agree that it was good news. It would also belie what you saw if you looked out the window.

The year is 587 BC. The city is under siege by the armies of the mighty Babylonian Empire – an empire Jerusalem was subject to until recently when the present king of Judah, a fellow named Zedekiah, decided to rebel. Emperor Nebuchnezzar didn't like that. He had a

reputation to maintain and an empire to rule. So he sent his armies to put down the rebellion and to make an example of Judah so that other nations he'd conquered wouldn't get any similar ideas. These armies had already conquered the rest of Judah, leveling its fortresses, burning its cities and towns, ravishing the countryside, and enslaving the people. Only Jerusalem remains. Remarkably, most of the people in the city aren't worried. They are convinced that they will be saved. They figured the city has been under siege before; but it has never fallen outright. No, there were times in the past when the Lord averted disaster by distracting the invaders with another threat or by sending a plague on them. Other times more recently the leaders of Jerusalem have worked out a deal of some kind with the enemy. That's what happened the last time. About 10 years earlier these same Babylonians were here because Judah had rebelled against them. Then they negotiated a truce. Sure, there was a price to pay. Some 50,000 people were hauled off into exile and a heavy fine was imposed; but they pulled through. The same thing happened about a decade before that. That time only a few hundred folks were exiled. Most of the people of Jerusalem were certain that something like that would happen again. They were going to be all right. That's what their priests and leaders kept telling them. And it's what they wanted to believe.

And what convinced them of this more than anything was what they believed to be their "ace in the hold": the Temple of the Lord God was in their city. This is where the Lord had chosen to make his dwelling on earth. They knew that there was no way he would allow his city to fall. It was absolutely unthinkable to them that the Lord would permit his Temple to become defiled.

Only the prophet Jeremiah and the handful of people who believed the Word of the Lord spoken by him were saying otherwise. God's message through Jeremiah was consistent and clear: I've had it with you. I'm done. This time Jerusalem will fall. The city will be razed to the ground. A third of its inhabitants will die by starvation during the siege. Another third will die by the sword when the enemy breaches the walls and sacks the city. The remaining third will be sold into slavery and scattered throughout the Babylonian Empire. The dynastic house of David will be cut down like a tree, leaving only the stump. And the Temple you place so much confidence in? It will be defiled and completely destroyed.

Why? Because the people of Jerusalem had already defiled it. Indeed, they were continuing to defile it every day, and the Lord was sick of it. If you had visited the Temple at the time, it would have looked exactly like any other pagan worship site. It was full of the idols of false gods and their altars. The rights and rituals of these false gods to include cultic prostitution and the sacrifice of infants were being practiced right alongside what was allegedly the worship of the Lord – but wasn't. No, the sacrifices that were supposed to be understood as blood atonement for repentant sinners had been changed in the minds of priests and people as offerings to earn the Lord's favor. "See, Lord? We do you a good turn, and now you owe us one." Their religion was a complete mishmash of idolatry and worldly philosophy peppered with enough of the real Word of God to make it sound authentic. One thing lacking from that Word, however, was any genuine preaching of the Law. The Law is supposed to be proclaimed to reveal people's sins and their need for God's forgiveness and salvation; but that's not what was happening. Instead, those who taught the Law were using it to show the people how good they were, to commend them for being so devout. And hey, if we're good and righteous, and the Lord is so pleased with us, it makes it that much more certain that he's going to keep us safe and secure from the enemy now surrounding us.

It fell to Jeremiah to denounce these false ideas and pagan practices, and to warn the people of God's judgment now about to be executed by the Babylonian army. Sadly, his

message fell mostly on deaf ears. And for his trouble, Jeremiah was put in prison. The king and religious leaders didn't want his dire words and urgent warnings to upset anyone or shatter the illusion that everything was going to turn out just fine and dandy.

To fully appreciate today's text, then, you have to put yourself in Jeremiah's sandals. He's tried. He's faithfully proclaimed God's Word. He's urged the people of Jerusalem to repent of their many sins and to return to the Lord God and to him alone. But almost no one has listened. So now the city is under siege. It will fall. God's judgment is at hand. The Temple will be destroyed. The cost in human lives and suffering will be appalling. And here I am in prison. It's all going to end right here. My mission has been a complete and utter failure.

It is to Jeremiah in prison that the Lord speaks these words. By them he tells the prophet, "No, you haven't failed. You've done what I told you to do. You've spoken my Word to my people. You've called them to repent. You've warned them of what will happen if they don't. But you can't make them believe. And so, because they are stubborn, won't listen, and refuse to repent, they will be destroyed. But that will not change or cancel my promises. The days are coming when I *will* fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I *will* cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the Land. In those days Judah *will* be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he shall be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness'."

To Jeremiah and those few who did believe him, these words must have sounded implausible, to say the least. How could the Lord keep his promise to Judah if the entire nation was swept away? How could there be a descendant of David to be the righteous Branch to spring up and execute justice – that is, to rule properly – if there were no kingdom for him to rule over? It was all pretty farfetched. But by God's grace and the power of the Spirit Jeremiah and a few others did believe. And the Lord, as always, kept his Word.

It was many decades after Jerusalem fell and the nation of Judah was destroyed that the Empire of Babylon also fell to the king of Persia, who established his own empire. It was he who ordered the people of Judah in exile to return to their land, their nation to be recreated, and the Temple of the Lord to be rebuilt. It was he too who appointed as governor of Judah a descendant of David – a descendant of David who was also to be the ancestor of one Joseph of Nazareth, the guardian and legal father of the Lord Jesus. He, of course, is the righteous Branch that sprang forth from the stump of David. And it was he who executed justice and righteousness, oddly enough, by being executed himself – his righteous life given on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for sin. He is for repentant sinners who trust in him the Lord our righteousness.

And so he will remain until he comes again in glory to execute justice on this world. Then he will overthrow and cast away the wicked and unbelieving, and crown with everlasting life those who are righteous not by their own doing, but by their faith in him.

It's important that we keep looking to him to be our righteousness. Much of what calls itself Christianity today does not. Just as in the days of Jeremiah, there are many who are changing the Church's essential message, mixing and mingling it with a lot of stuff that simply doesn't belong. From many pulpits the Word that is proclaimed is not, "Here's your sin. Repent of it. Be forgiven. And stand before the Lord trusting in Christ to be your righteousness." Instead it's more "Here's how you can be righteous on your own through your obedience." And in many places, like the liberal churches I mentioned earlier, they're even

changing the definition of sin. It's no longer murder, theft, adultery and the rest of what God's Word declares and has traditionally been recognized as sin that's preached against. Now it's intolerance, greenhouse gasses and CO² emissions, western imperialism, opposing a woman's right to kill her unborn baby, fracking, chemical pesticides and fertilizers, gender inequality, homophobia, nuclear energy, free market capitalism, eating red meat, eating any meat, eating processed foods, eating genetically modified foods, eating non-organic foods, and anything else you think, do, or say that might possibly offend someone else—these are the sins being preached against. And you can bet that where such sins are being decried, the pastors are preaching to the choir – to people who wouldn't dream of doing such things, and who think therefore that they must be pretty righteous just the way they are.

It is often in these same liberal churches where people are being taught not to look forward to Christ's second coming to establish the kingdom of eternal righteousness. No, the idea is that the Church itself is bringing righteousness to the earth by teaching everyone to live right. Once we're all green, socialist, organic, eating properly, and completely tolerant of each other's choices and lifestyles however bizarre or immoral, then we will have achieved it. Then we will be our righteousness. And everything will be fine and dandy. We'll live happily ever after. This is what Jesus meant when he spoke of his reign at his second coming. It's a spiritual thing.

Um, no. He meant what he said. He *will* keep his promise to come again in glory, remove the old order, and create for us a new heaven and a new earth. Just as he came the first time to execute justice and righteousness for us by his perfect obedience and his death on the cross, so also he will keep his Word to gather his faithful unto himself and give us an everlasting inheritance in his eternal home – the kingdom in which he will be forever what he is for us now: the Lord our righteousness. God grant that we who long to be delivered of our sins may eagerly look forward to the Day of his coming. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!