

Jeremiah 33: 1-3, 10-18
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Glorious

Last week, you heard Casey faithfully preach about good King Josiah who was a rare blip in the saga of the divided kingdom. Josiah embraced the words in the hidden scroll discovered in the Temple and called the kingdom to do the same. Within that same text Josiah is told that the reforms he institutes would not last and that Jerusalem and the Temple would ultimately be destroyed. The only glimmer of good news in this declaration was that Josiah would not be to blame for this devastation, nor would it happen on his watch. And the promised devastation does come. Our text for this morning is set in Jerusalem after the city has fallen. The prophet Jeremiah, who has preached against the idolatry and unfaithfulness of the people of Judah and her puppet kings now finds himself behind prison bars. [Read Jeremiah 33: 1-3, 10-18]

Today marks the beginning of Advent, of course, and the first day of the church's new year. In this season we wait and pray and wonder and maybe even dream a bit as we listen to prophets who speak God's word of hope, peace, joy, justice, love, and promise into a world longing for redemption, longing for a savior. These voices seem long ago and far away at times, and yet, that longing rings true right here, right now. As I prepared for worship in this season, I found myself humming one of my favorite carols, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and I found myself wondering about the notion of a "deep and dreamless sleep." I doubt that Bethlehem—a tiny town in the southern kingdom of Judah—was filled with people sleeping restfully and peacefully as empire after empire controlled and managed their every move. I imagine instead that the people's sleep held a mix of deep dreams of something new and nightmares about the

everyday realities outside their doors. Or maybe their sleep was dreamless because they had lost the ability to dream—maybe their sleep was not peaceful or tranquil, but empty. Perhaps they had forgotten how to dream at all.

The book of Jeremiah is long and filled with the prophet's words of warning and condemnation for a nation and her kings who are too quick to bend to the whims of foreign invaders, all too willing to worship idols and follow along with what is convenient rather than risk doing what is right and faithful. The prophet also shares words of encouragement, insisting in a letter to those in exile that it is faithful to build a life in a foreign land. Jeremiah writes from Jerusalem before and after its destruction. This morning's text finds him imprisoned—"confined" as the text reads—by Zedekiah, the king of Judah. The king is outraged by Jeremiah's prophesying that God is punishing the king and the other leaders of Judah by allowing the Babylonians to defeat Zedekiah and the nation of Judah. And although God directs Jeremiah to buy a plot of land in this soon to be defeated and decimated city, Jeremiah himself is struggling to see anything beyond the apparently godforsaken wasteland that now remains. He—prophet though he may be—is finding it hard to believe there is life and hope beyond the destruction he sees everywhere he is able to look from his prison cell.

Our Books & Brews group gathered on Thursday evening to discuss Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. This beloved story has been told and re-told countless times with the help of George C. Scott, Bill Murray, and Kermit the Frog, so it was fun to dig back into the author's world and words. Perhaps because I had Jeremiah on the brain, I was struck by characters in the story who were confined or imprisoned, too. You may recall that Ebenezer Scrooge's Christmas Eve evening begins with a visit from the ghost of Jacob Marley, Scrooge's longtime business

partner. Marley's ghost is draped with heavy chains forged in life as he hoarded money refusing to offer grace or generosity to anyone who crossed his path. His was a narrow life, confined by barriers of his own making. As he tells Scrooge:

My spirit never walked beyond our counting-house...In life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole.¹

Marley's vision and as a result his entire life was confined to what he could earn, what he could count, what he could keep, and Ebenezer's is much the same. And now Marley has arrived to alert Scrooge to the arrival of three spirits—three dreams, nightmares really, who will seek to open Scrooge's eyes and heart and life to something beyond his narrow, confined world.

Jeremiah's confinement is not of his own making. He has been faithful in sharing the often harsh but honest words that God has placed on his tongue. And yet, as he finds himself confined, looking out on a decimated Jerusalem, he, too, needs help seeing something more, something hopeful, something beyond what he can imagine at the moment. He needs reminding that God has not given up on the promise God made with God's people so long ago. He needs help dreaming; he needs an infusion of holy imagination. And that is exactly what God gives him: "Call to me, and I will answer you and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known." God does not expect Jeremiah to come up with the vision all on his own. Instead, God reminds the prophet to listen to *God's* voice to hear a word of promise, to begin to see beyond the walls of his prison cell.

And God goes on to paint a picture vivid with life and hope and joy and peace. As The Voice translation reads:

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 29.

Listen to Me, Jeremiah. You say this place will become a *desolate* wasteland with no people and no animals, *but it will not always be so.* The towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem may indeed become lifeless, but I, the Eternal One, promise you *the silence will be broken.* Once again you will hear the sounds of laughter and joy, the sweet words of the bride and bridegroom *at a wedding,* and voices of those who bring thank offerings to the temple singing.²

It is an exquisite vision, one that may seem too good to be true. I find it stunning that this vision is not set in some far off, sweet by and by. The scene that God paints is not one of an otherworldly paradise but of Jerusalem, the ravaged city where Jeremiah sits in prison and the Temple lies in ruins. God speaks of animals grazing where nothing can now live and faithful shepherds who know and name every last sheep. The description is rich and vibrant and it demands a large helping of imagination and a willingness to dream with God the Creator who is determined to redeem and re-create when all seems lost.

Scrooge needs help seeing beyond the confines of his miserly narrow life, and that help comes to him in the form of three spirits who show him more than he has been willing or able to see before. Jeremiah needs help imagining life beyond the wasteland outside the confines of his prison cell, and that help comes in the form of a vision God paints of hope and new life in the promise of a king unlike any other, a branch from David's line who will lead with righteousness, guiding the people back to right and good relationship with one another and with God, too. I may not be confined to a counting house or a prison cell, but many days I

² Jeremiah 33:10-11, *The Voice*

struggle to see something new, something hopeful beyond the current landscape. I need help to see that as well. Maybe you do, too.

I have yet to hear God speak to me in my office above the playground or through the speakers of my Rav4. I am often stymied by the endless headlines declaring the terrible state of the world and the heartless inhumanity that seems to win the day. It is enough to cause any reasonable person to hole up with a bowl of gruel like Scrooge behind a locked door and a frozen heart. And then God taps me on the shoulder and prods me to look up and out, to imagine “great and hidden things that [I] have not known” or have forgotten to look for. And by the grace of God, I see that this world is not godforsaken but is in fact still very much God-beloved. I see the compassionate tears of a deacon who has heard the struggles of a grandparent trying to keep the lights on for her grandchildren whose parent is in prison. I watch volunteers answer a last-minute call to serve our unhoused neighbors on a busy December Saturday. I have witnessed many of you wrestle with complicated social and political issues, doing your faithful best to listen for God’s guidance in a messy world. I have seen many of you show up on a Sunday morning determined to worship the Lord of all, even when the shadows of death, depression, loneliness, addiction, and disappointment loom large. I have heard God speak through children who call us to worship, light candles, and marvel at the beauty of twinkling lights and Christmas trees and beautiful music. And I have caught a glimpse of God’s vision around this table. Every time we gather for communion, God challenges me and us to see not simply a lovely wooden table with cups of juice and cubes of gluten-free bread, but an abundant and joyful feast. Each time we share this meal, God places a vision in front of us, inviting us not only to remember that night in an upper room but also to imagine a banquet

table that extends beyond the horizon with a place for each and every one of God's beloved children—from north and south and east and west. At this table, God charges us to see beyond the confines of what we know and to embrace the promise of something new, something more.

One of the first things Scrooge does after his wild night with the three spirits is fling open the shutters and the window. The world outside has not changed; Ebenezer's vision of it has:

No fog, no mist; clear, bright, jovial, stirring, cold; cold piping for the blood to dance to; Golden sunlight; Heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells. Oh, glorious! Glorious! [he proclaims.]³

No longer is Scrooge a distant cynic writing off the world as worthless and godforsaken. On this first new morning, he dives into life in and with his community. Like Jeremiah, Scrooge's life has always been woven in with the lives of those around him. Only now does he celebrate and relish that connection and the gift of all that lies ahead.

I do not expect that I or anyone else will be visited by three ghostly spirits this season, but as we wait and wonder and hope and long for our Savior, I am convinced that God's Spirit is at work even now. That Spirit is calling us to lift our eyes and open our hearts, even as that same Spirit fills us with holy dreams, leading us forward to dream and dive into a world we cannot fully see, let alone create without a good bit of help. And I promise, dear ones, this new creation is and will be glorious, just as our promised Savior, God's righteous branch is and will be glorious, not simply for us but for all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Dickens, 119.