

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Advent 1

November 28, 2021

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

Just a promise

¹⁴ Listen, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the good promises that I have spoken to the house of Israel and concerning the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time, I will cause a righteous Branch to grow up from David's line. He will establish justice and righteousness on earth. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. This is what it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.

—Jeremiah 33:14-16

The way the world around us celebrates Christmas and the way the Christian Church celebrates Christmas are opposite. In the secular world, everything leads up to the big day when Santa comes. They started playing Christmas music on some radio stations already a few weeks ago to get people into the holiday spirit. Black Friday sort of kicks off the "official" shopping season, and the encouragement all around us is "spend, spend, spend!" The National Retail Federation projects that during November and December American consumers will spend somewhere around \$850 billion. (That's getting close to \$1 trillion!) But then Christmas Day hits, and it's all over. On December 26 there's hardly any Christmas music left on the airwaves, even as there are long lines at the retail service counters with customers returning unwanted or broken or wrong-sized gifts. No more jingle bells or Rudolph or even Joy to the World, just year-end sales and wishes for a Happy New Year.

In the Christian Church we celebrate differently. Leading up to Christmas we have the season of Advent. It's a season for reflection, introspection, preparation and contemplation. Then when Christmas arrives on December 25 we celebrate the birth of our Savior, and that begins the 12 days of Christmas that culminate in Epiphany on January 6. When the world's celebration comes to an end, ours is just getting started!

So why do we do it this way? Why do we have Advent, a time for reflection, for self-searching, for repentance? Why prepare to meet Jesus? I mean, we know all about Jesus, right? We know about his birth, his ministry, his miracles, his obedience, his death and resurrection, don't we? We already know all those things, so why pause for reflection and self-examination? The answer is very simple yet very serious. The sobering reality is that any human being can know all those things and not have saving faith and not be ready to meet him in the Judgment. Having a bunch of facts and information rattling around inside our heads about Jesus Christ is not the same as trusting him. Saint James writes, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder" (James 2:19). Jesus himself teaches us to examine our hearts and lives carefully. In his Sermon on the Mount he told his disciples, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:21-23). So the Bible exhorts us, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). And Holy Scripture tells us, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

A faith relationship with Jesus Christ is based on facts, to be sure, but it is more than facts. It begins with a deep sorrow for our sins and a profound recognition of how dearly we need Jesus. Our heart is broken and contrite as we confess and grieve over our sins. This is repentance; without repentance there is no faith. Impenitence is the same as unbelief—which is why it is so insidious and dangerous because we can know all the facts about Christ and be secure and content in our sins and blissfully, cluelessly headed to hell. But with penitent hearts, with a deep recognition of our need for our Savior, we look to Jesus, the Lamb of God, the sacrifice for our sins, our righteousness, the Sun of our soul and the Light of our life, and we trust in him for forgiveness and eternal life. We look forward to his arrival as the Baby in Bethlehem, and we pray fervently, "Lord, come quickly!" for his return at the end of time. Saving faith is simple trust, quiet confidence born of a penitent heart and good conscience, that clings firmly to Christ and rests in him.

Today we return to the Word of the LORD spoken through his Prophet Jeremiah to a little country in the ancient Middle East called Judah. It's an example of what we just talked about with repentance. Did the people of Judah know the LORD? Of course they did! They had the temple right there in Jerusalem with the priesthood and the rituals and sacrifices and the holy days and festivals. They had it all right there, and many of them even went through the motions! But they did not repent and turn to the LORD. And now the warning words of the prophet have come true. Judah has been broken, defeated, humbled. Its cities are in ruins, its countryside has been laid waste. Its capital city of Jerusalem is on the verge of being toppled, its beautiful buildings about to be burned. Its people have been slaughtered, its best and brightest exiled. Judah is utterly devastated. Judah is in this shattered, fallen state because God said it would be this way. God warned and God wooed, God reached out and called to repentance, but Judah turned her face away from the LORD's pleas. And now Judah has reaped the

consequences of her rebellion against the LORD. Her idolatry, immorality, greed, oppression of the poor—these sins have rained down God’s judgment upon Judah. And now Judah sits in the dust, shrouded in shame, shattered by conquest, crushed by defeat. The people of Judah refused to humble their hearts in contrition and repentance, so God humbled them in dust and ashes.

It has been said that when we are completely beaten down there is only one direction we can look—up! Where do you turn when your world has been destroyed, when your nation is reduced to nothing? What do you hold onto to keep from falling off the cliff into despair? Judah had nothing left. It was all gone. Except for one thing. She had a promise. It was a promise from the LORD God:

“Listen, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will fulfill the good promises I have spoken to the house of Israel and concerning the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to grow up from David’s line. He will establish justice and righteousness on earth. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. This is what it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.”

It was just a promise. But it was a promise from the LORD God, from the God who reigns in the heavens, who always delivers in his time. It was just words, one might say. But it was the Word of God. Jerusalem was destroyed and Judah went into exile in Babylon, but God was not nearly finished with this people called the Jews because he had made a promise to them. It was a covenant that God had sealed with Abraham and the patriarchs, reaffirmed through Moses, amplified through King David and expounded through all the prophets. It was a promise that could not be broken because God cannot lie. So through the devastation of Judah, God continued to preserve the ancestral line of the Savior. Through exile and return, through the rise and fall of mighty empires, from one generation to the next, for the next 600 years, long after Jeremiah was gone, God quietly continued to set the stage for the fulfillment of his promise. And when the time had fully come, a righteous Branch sprouted from David’s line. His name was Jesus the Messiah. He did what was just and right in the land. He came to save his people from their sins, and he became our Righteousness. “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Galatians 4:4,5).

When Judah was defeated, what did she have to hold onto? Just a promise from God for deliverance and salvation. What do you hold onto when your world has been shattered, when the bottom falls out of your life? Thankfully, most of the time we don’t find ourselves in that dreadful situation. Most of the time, thank the Lord, life is beautiful, we celebrate many blessings, we enjoy comfort, peace and security. Most of the time we are not beaten down and shrouded in the dust. Most of the time. But there are also those times when we are deflated and overwhelmed, when we are crushed and perhaps on the verge of despair, when all the Black Friday deals and holiday cheer seem hollow and meaningless. When the person you love tells you you’re done and your relationship is over, and it’s like someone sucker-punched you in the gut leaving you gasping for air. I think of our Christian brother Paul who a week ago said good-bye to his wife Nancy—suddenly, unexpectedly. She was here, and now she’s gone. I think of when my niece was killed suddenly in a car accident, and just like that my family’s world was turned upside down. How do you handle a phone call like that when it comes? Some of us will bury our parents. Some of us will bury our children. All of us will say good-bye to dear loved ones and experience the gaping hole left by loss. All of us must prepare for our own death. Our sins and rebellions against God guarantee that we cannot remain in this life; the wages of our sin is death, and we must reap what we have sown. What do you hold onto when the reality strikes that this life under the sun is short and meaningless, that we must be judged and must stare into the face of eternity?

Just a promise. That’s all. Just a promise from God. And because the promise is from God it is firmer than the foundation of earth itself; it cannot fail. With a penitent heart we hold onto God’s promise that Jesus has forgiven our sins, and God’s forgiveness in Christ will not fail. “Whoever trusts in him will never be put to shame” (Romans 10:11). When we lose a loved one our hope for a blessed reunion in the resurrection rests on one thing: Just a promise. A promise that Jesus will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. And because that promise is from God it cannot fail. Whenever our conscience troubles us and our sins weigh us down, and we come to the Lord’s Table to receive Holy Communion, what do we have to hold onto? Just a promise, the promise that Jesus truly feeds us with his body and blood in the Sacrament, that our sins are truly and completely forgiven, and we are truly at peace with God. And because that promise is from God it cannot be a lie. Your sins are forgiven; depart in peace.

So as we enter this season of Advent, join me in self-examination, reflection and repentance. Repenting of the sins with which we have grieved God, let’s look up to God in heaven and hold onto his promise. Just a promise of forgiveness and eternal life, given to us in the Branch from David’s line, Jesus our Savior, the LORD our Righteousness. Amen.