

# The Promise of Better Days

The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006

*I hope you feel better. I hope you have a healthy baby. I hope the Giants beat the Cowboys this week. I hope I get an A in that class. I hope she likes me. I hope to make a difference in the world. I hope their marriage makes it. I hope I get the raise. I hope we have world peace by Christmas.*

Everyday we use that small, magical word – hope. It’s tough to live – or even make it through one day – without hope. What is hope? Based on all the examples I just gave (and the Biblical text we’re going to explore) I’d define hope like this: **Hope is a vision for better days which changes us in the present.** Hope is a vision for better days. There’s something up ahead, around the corner, in sight and it’s good. But that good future isn’t just abstract because it reaches into and transforms us in the present. So, for example, if I’m hoping for an A in that class, it will (at least it should) motivate me to study right now. If I’m hoping for the raise, I will work harder. If I want world peace, I can stop shouting at my own children. As a child I knew well the power of hope around this time of year. Because I knew my parents would buy me toys, I had a vision for better days with better toys. But that also changed my present attitude and actions. That vision for the future drove me to scour catalogs and magazines, make careful lists of the toys I wanted and then it would even drive me to hunt under my parent’s bed in order to sneak a peek at the better days up ahead in my life. Hope is a vision for better days which changes us in the present. On this first Sunday of Advent I invite you to a journey of better days, a journey of real and lasting hope

To help us in our journey I want to introduce to you the prophet of hope, a man named Jeremiah. Here’s the story behind the verses you just heard. Jeremiah was a real figure of history. Around the year 627 B.C., while Jeremiah would have been about junior at Ward Melville High School, God came to him and said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as prophet to the nations” (1:4). Now fast forward forty years. Jeremiah is still a spiritual leader for his community but the nation is in a crisis. The year is 587 B.C. and the king of Babylon and his troops have surrounded the capital city of Jerusalem, setting up a deadly siege that left the people inside Jerusalem on the brink of starvation (see 2 Kings 25:2-3). Zedekiah, the King of Israel, still thinks he can beat the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar so he keeps fighting back.

Meanwhile, Jeremiah tells him, “It’s over, Zedekiah. Just give up and give in. The king of Babylon will come into the city and you will surrender, so you can trust God and do it the easy way or you can do it the hard way.” (By the way, Zedekiah will choose to do it the hard way – see 2 Kings 25:5-7). The rest of the spiritual leaders and prophets were assuring the king that Jeremiah was a fraud and a crackpot. They kept telling the king exactly what he wanted to hear: “You da man, King Zedekiah. Nobody can mess with our nation. We always win because God is always on our side.” On the other hand,

Jeremiah kept warning the king that these false prophets were merely offering cheap and false hope: “They dress the wounds of my people as though they were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14). Jeremiah’s basic message was this: Look deeper, King, because this isn’t a military thing; it’s a spiritual thing. In other words, the people of God have rejected the covenant of God. They’ve been committing spiritual adultery for far too long (see Jeremiah 2:12-13 and 3:21). King Zedekiah didn’t like this message, so he branded Jeremiah an unpatriotic menace to national security, arrested him and then threw him into jail.

Now in the midst of these grim historical circumstances, as Jeremiah sits in a squalid prison cell, misunderstood, persecuted, hunted down, labeled and derided, he will proclaim some of the most powerful words of hope found in the entire Hebrew Bible. Chapters 30-33 are often called the Book of Consolation or just the Book of Hope.

Notice that hope, according to the Bible, is a vision for better days. See verse 14 - “The days are coming,” declares the Lord (See also 30:3). All throughout the Older Testament there are hints and pictures and clues that say the same thing: Better days are coming. The clues and pictures are so powerful, that they should take our breath away:

- Isaiah 2:4;
- Isaiah 9:6-7
- Isaiah 11:1-9
- Micah 7:19
- Zephaniah 3:16-17.

Now for the follower of Jesus hope always depends on the reliability of the one who makes the promises. Hope is never based on our wishful thinking or positive feelings or even how much faith we have. Hope is based on a God who is really there, a God who has left good and sufficient reasons for us to know and trust Him. If the whole Jesus Christ thing isn’t reliable and trustworthy, then it’s not worth our hope.

This view of hope counters a misconception that goes like this: religion and spirituality are based on myths and feelings while science is based purely on reason and rationality. So, for instance, a contemporary author named Sam Harris (who has written *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian*) quotes a young woman who wrote to his website: “As far as trying to rationally prove that God exists, I don’t even try ... So how do I know God exists ... I FEEL him.” Apparently, for Harris, every believer would express their faith in the same way. Elsewhere Harris says, “Tell a devout Christian that his wife is cheating on him, or that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible, and he is likely to require as much as evidence as anyone else ... (But) tell him (to accept the Bible) and he seems to require no evidence at all.” Apparently, for Harris, the world is divided neatly and cleanly into two and only two categories of people: reasonable and rational people like him who actually think through issues and come to the right conclusion that faith is crazy; and irrational, dumb people who don’t think through the issues and therefore mistakenly conclude that there must be a God – which by the way, leads to absolute disaster. But in the Bible, hope in God is never pulled out of thin air. It’s based on a particular history with God, a history that gives us glimpses of God’s character and

provides reasons why we should trust God and place our hope in God. In the Bible, science and faith are never mutually incompatible quests. Hope is based on reason; it's not irrational; it's never pulled out of thin air.

The vision for a better future isn't based in our wishful thinking or even our faith in that future; instead, the promises point to a specific person. Hope is not wrapped up in a season or a program or in a new job or a better spouse or a bigger house. Hope is wrapped up in a Person. The biblical word for this person is called Messiah. In verse 15 this person is called a "righteous branch who will sprout from David's line." What does that mean? First of all, all throughout the Old Testament the greatest king was King David. He was a flawed and imperfect man, but he was also a warrior for justice and truth and a man after God's own heart. Towards the end of David's life and then throughout the rest of the Old Testament story God kept promising, "I will raise up a king like David – but much better than David. He will rule my people; he will bless the whole earth." The plant, the roots are David, but from those roots God will do a new thing. A new branch, attached to the roots, will sprout and grow."

In Jeremiah 33:16 He is the "Lord our Righteousness." In the Bible righteousness is a relational term. In other words, a righteous person is someone who lives totally right with God and with others. Unfortunately, the Bible also says that none of us are righteous. Perhaps we get it right part of the time, but that doesn't help us. You're either righteous or you're not righteous. Unfortunately, none of us get it right. But this Branch, this promised one, this messiah, will be called "The Lord our Righteousness." In other words, he will get it right – all the time. He will be the only fully Righteous human being who has ever lived. And this leads into the heart of what Christians call the Gospel. Because the New Testament declares that when Jesus – the Lord our Righteousness, died on the cross, he took upon himself our unrighteousness and then in a marvelous exchange we received his righteousness (see 2 Corinthians 5:20-21). That is simply astounding good news of freedom for all of us here this morning! .

Hope is about a promise and a person. Now all of that can sound academic and safe until we get to the last part of our definition of hope: it changes us in the present. Once you start down the path of hope, there's no turning back. Let me put it this way: hope will "ruin" your life. I have to be honest, sometimes its better not to hope. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hopelessness closes the human heart, but once you start hoping, you become vulnerable. Once you start hoping, your heart starts bursting with longing – because now you have something that you want. Hope will turn your life upside down.

For instance, up until I was about twelve years old, I had never been to a Minnesota Vikings football game. As a young boy few things were more thrilling than sitting in my cozy living room on a Sunday afternoon and watching 55,000 Minnesotans dressed in snowmobile suits watching our Minnesota Vikings play in ten degree weather, sipping coffee from plaid thermoses and filling the air with their hot breath. But I was a safe spectator, watching Carl Eller and Fran Tarkenton from the safety of my warm living room. I didn't have hope for a real Vikings game.

But then one day in early August my dad announced that he had purchased two sets of season tickets for all of the Vikings games. The three boys – me and my brothers Dave and Steve - would have a draft in which we would select two games. I would actually attend a real Vikings game – in cold, with real men, drinking hot chocolate, in the vastness of the Hubert Humphrey Stadium. Now I had hope. What do you think hope does to a twelve year old boy? O, hope is good! Hope sets your heart pounding with wild enthusiasm. Hope opens your life to more joy and delight and adventure than you ever thought possible. But hope also opens your hear to the ache of waiting and longing. In some ways, my life was simpler and less painful before I had the hope of going to a Vikings game. I was content to sit in the controlled and safe suburban living room without setting one foot outside in the cold Minnesota air. Now I had hope and it split me wide open. Of course hope eventually leads to fulfillment. I attended my two games. As the Bible promises, “hope (as opposed to wishful thinking) does not disappoint” (Romans 5:5). I put on the snowsuit and sat in the bleachers in weather cold enough to crack your lips wide open and turn your antifreeze to slush as the Vikings beat the Green Bay Packers. But hope didn’t resolve tension; it increased the tension. Hope always draws a picture of a beautiful and good future and then says, “It’s coming. It’s coming. It will be yours. The One who promised it is faithful and true, but you’ll have to wait for it.”

Do you see how hope changes you? If you’ve opened your heart to Jesus, he will give you a vision of better days. Actually, for the follower of Jesus, those better days have already come – at least in part. The better days promised in the Older Testament are available to us right now – this morning even! You can call on the name of the Lord and receive and enter into the promise of better days. That is the good news of the Gospel. The power of God is available today, not just for some distant future. God’s beautiful future has already begun and you can have a taste of it today. When you call on the name of Jesus, he gives you a taste of his incredible future better days right now.

But I have to warn you: once you start to do that, you won’t be able to go back anymore. You can’t just sit in the living room and watch life on a little TV screen. You have to live it – fully, passionately, deeply. As one of the characters says in the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, “Hope is a dangerous thing. It can drive us insane.” When you come to Jesus he will upend your life. He will inject a massive dose of hope in your heart. (And let me just say: if you’re a follower of Jesus, and you’ve lost your hope, let’s journey together this Advent, asking Jesus to put hope back into us). You can’t go back to normal life anymore. Jeremiah couldn’t just live a comfortable life anymore. Life as he knew it was over. He couldn’t just go along with the crowd that was cheering Zedekiah and offering cheap and shallow hope. God had given him a picture of this new future and this new hope. For Jeremiah even if it meant going to jail, he couldn’t look back.

Hope ruins your life. Because once you experience hope, you can’t go back to life as you used to know it. I have a friend who has been visiting Cambodia and Thailand with a Christ-based ministry that works in some of the most wretched places of the earth. This ministry rescues young girls and boys who are trapped in the global sex trade. Many of

them have been prostitutes from a young age, but this ministry intervenes by setting up safe houses where they can find freedom, faith in a Loving Heavenly Father, deep cleansing of their shame and guilt, protection, housing and education and training. My friend has seen horrors and brutality beyond description. But he's also been touched by hope. He's watched other people who have been ruined by hope minister to these children. He's watched defiled and used children become new creatures in Christ – and all of this has ruined him. He can't go back to his old life anymore. Now don't misunderstand: he still has the same job and the same wife and the same family and church and small group. He just doesn't approach life the same way anymore.

Hope does that to us. It upends us. When God says, "Better days are coming," and we really start to believe it, it will change us. We start to align our lives with hope. And of course we don't have to go to Cambodia to start this.

Hope provides us with a vision of the God's future which allows us to risk. Without dreams you don't have hope. Hope causes us to risk – which is exactly what Jeremiah had just done in Chapter 32. It's a wonderful story and I encourage you to read it for yourself but here's a summary of chapter 32. In the year 587 B.C., while the Babylonian army was hammering away at Jerusalem, Jeremiah knew that the army would break through the wall, conquer the city, haul most of the people into exile. The situation looked utterly hopeless. So the next day Jeremiah's uncle visited him in prison and offered to sell Jeremiah a vacant lot in the suburbs of Jerusalem. This is the worst time to buy a property. Only a total idiot would buy a vacant lot now. The city is under siege, it will fall to the Babylonian army and everyone is going to get deported. But Jeremiah lives by the promises of God – again, this isn't wishful thinking or just a feeling; for Jeremiah, it's all based on God's track record in creation and history and redemption. To Jeremiah, the decision makes sense. So he buys the field, hoping to come back to live in that field as God had promised. But God had also given a promise, a promise of better days. God had said that the captivity would end and the people would return to this same land.

Jeremiah put his faith into practice. If you have hope, if you hold on to God's promise of better days, if you're trusting that Jesus is the Righteous One, it has to work itself into your life. The risks may be small ... Or they may be mid-sized risks ... Or they may be big risks ... but you have to put your hope into practice.

If this is the case, if hope "ruins" our lives, if the promise of better days in Jesus will upend our lives, isn't I better to settle into the routine of hopelessness? Isn't it better to live in denial? We could look at this very practically from a neurological level: neurologically pain and pleasure run on the same pathways. So when you refuse to weep, you shut down laughter; when you refuse to ache and long, you refuse to rejoice. How much joy do you want in this life? If you want to stuff your pain deep inside, if you want to numb the ache of living with hope in an incomplete world, if you want to give yourself instead to false hope and cheap and shallow hope, then you'll cut yourself off from real joy as well. That's exactly what happens to the people of Jeremiah's day – see 33:6-9.

Why hope even though hope is a dangerous thing? Because I want healing. I want my life to be rebuilt. I want to be cleansed by God. And I want to find joy in God.

As we walk through this season of Advent, this season of waiting and longing and rejoicing and hoping, I want to give you more questions than answers. So ponder the questions of hope. This morning I want to leave you with four questions:

- Is your hope centered in a Person or something else?
- As you have grown as a Christian, has your hope expanded or diminished?
- How has hope “ruined” your life?
- What are you willing to risk because of who Jesus and what he has done, what are you willing to risk?