

# What's In a Prophecy?

**TEXT:**  
**Luke 23:33-43**  
**Jeremiah 23:1-6**

November 25, 2007

**W**hat's in a prophecy? The subtitle could easily be, *And why do we care?*

On this Christ the King Sunday, we come to the end of our liturgical year. Next week, with the beginning of Advent, we start the new Christian year. We start the story over again – lost in the dark, waiting for the light, the promise, and the hope. We know, having read these stories year in and year out, the arrival of the Christ-child will come on Christmas. But that's for next week.

This week, we celebrate the finale, the end of the story, the culmination of Jesus' birth, childhood, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. We hear the awesome victory in what seems obvious defeat, as Christ hangs on the cross and declares to the penitent thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."<sup>i</sup> And we draw the connections between the gut-wrenching despair of Jeremiah's time and the gut-wrenching act of crucifixion with the revelation of truth, the fulfillment of promise, the realization of long held hope that manifests in Jesus as the Christ, the King, who triumphs over all and rules God's kingdom from the throne of heaven.

Christ the King Sunday is, in and of itself, fairly obvious. We mark the reign of Christ, seen in the gospel passage as the thief

asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into His heavenly kingdom and Jesus goes one step further, promising not only to remember this soul currently still on earth but to greet him imminently in heaven.<sup>ii</sup> We affirm the promise made to us, in this passage that **we** are remembered by our Lord and will join Him in the heavenly kingdom when our life on this earth is complete.

If that's all we had to deal with in this morning's Scriptures, we'd pretty well be done. Sermon over.

But we also have Jeremiah to contend with. Jeremiah, who is one of the major prophets of Israel (that is to say, one of the more verbose prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, his book of prophecy being longer than most of the others). We have prophecy to contend with. And as we approach Advent, a season that finds us combing the prophetic Scriptures of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and others more than any other season, it's important to answer the question, "What's in a prophecy, and why do we care?"

For centuries upon centuries, the people of God have relied on prophets to communicate the holy Word to them. From the time of the prophet-judges (like Deborah) to the time of the prophet-kings (like David) to the time of the prophet-priests (like Jeremiah) to the long silence broken centuries later by John the Baptist, God's Word has

been heard through prophecy.

Prophecies contain both general communication from God (discourse dealing with current events), as well as "prediction[s] or declaration[s] of what will come ... in the future."<sup>iii</sup> In today's Scripture, we read Jeremiah's prophecy for the future. Out of utter despair, God will bring redemption, reconstruction, restoration, and hope that will be realized in the future ruler of Judah.

At this point in Jeremiah's prophetic career the Northern Kingdom is long gone, the ten Northern Tribes of Israel devastated by the Assyrians. Now, the Southern Kingdom is falling. The Babylonian army has already begun the attack on Jerusalem. It's only a matter of time before the Holy City falls. The common people beyond the walls and in surrounding cities are dead or imprisoned, carried off to exile in the strongholds of Babylon. Within the city, King Zedekiah watches his nation, God's nation, disintegrate before his eyes.<sup>iv</sup> The tactics of the Babylonians will be ruthless when they breach Jerusalem's walls, humiliating then killing the most powerful (so they cannot lead a revolt or muster the people), carrying off the rest as spoils of war to serve as slaves in Babylon, dividing families and removing a people so tied to their promised land to a foreign soil. Judah will be Babylonian territory, but none of Judah's tribe will be allowed to remain there.

In the midst of this crisis and chaos and Jeremiah's despair, the voice of God comes to the prophet, and Jeremiah proclaims:

*"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king ... In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: [ADONI Sedaqnu – The LORD of our Righteousness]."*<sup>v</sup>

Now that's a prophecy. All hell has broken loose for the people of God, and yet God's Word booms forth that God will, once again, redeem the people. God will gather them back together. God will bring them back to this promised land. God will set up shepherds – not a corrupt king or a compromised priest or a wayfaring prophet – but an heir from the line of David (the King of the Golden Age), a man from among the people, who will shepherd (care for, love, and lead) the people with goodness, good intent, and righteousness.

Within this prophecy is the promise of restoration – families brought back together, a nation returned to its promised land, a leader who is just and ethical. Within this prophecy is the promise of righteousness – God's action to reestablish right relationship between Himself and His people and moral purity on the part of the leader<sup>vi</sup>. Now that's a prophecy. That's a promise worth latching onto. That's hope for a nation, for individuals, for a prophet who cannot see light at the end of this dark tunnel, who cannot see daylight for the blackness of the night.

So, why do we care?

As we approach Advent, it's easy to write off the stories of this Christian year and look forward to the next. We're already geared up by Thanksgiving and holiday shopping and Christmas carols on commercials and lights and trees and invitations to parties, to be in the Christmas Spirit, to grab onto the anticipation of Advent, and rush forward to the promise fulfilled on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

But today, we pause to reflect on all the stories of this past Christian year. We remember the prophecies we've heard – lessons taught by Christ and assurances for the future given by Jesus to his disciples. We read the end of Jesus' earthly story and the assurance, the prediction, the declaration, the prophecy, that the thief (and any who are like him) will be with Jesus the King, in a time to come – a time to come shortly – in the heavenly paradise. We read this prophecy of Jeremiah, see its promise fulfilled in the triumph of Jesus Christ on the cross, and know that God's promises are true; God's prophets speak truth; God's Word transcends time and will be fulfilled.

For Jeremiah, the vision he saw, the message he proclaimed, would not come to pass until 446BC when Nehemiah would return to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the Holy City.<sup>vii</sup> It would take 150 years of waiting, of hoping, of relying on the promise of God through the prophet's words, before the remnants of Israel would begin to see the promise fulfilled. It would take another 475 years before Jesus would utter his last on the cross and claim the throne

– finishing the promise that David's heir would be The LORD of our Righteousness.

We care – or we should care – because for many of us it seems that we, as the people of God, are living through another prophetic dry spell.

After the fall of Jerusalem, when the Babylonians laid waste to the Holy City, prophetic voices were essentially silenced. Not until the cry of John in the wilderness heralding the Messiah and calling the people to baptism and repentance, did Israel or her descendants hear God's voice through his earthly messengers.<sup>viii</sup> And yet, the promise in Jeremiah's prophecy remained. The promise foretold was fulfilled. The voice of the prophet, though long silenced and gone, still held meaning and message for the people of God.

This is why we care. For even if we are, truly, in the midst of another prophetic dry spell, the voice of the prophets of old, the promises made by God, the promise made by Christ on the cross, still speak to us today, in our modern context. The LORD of our Righteousness – the one referred to as Prophet, Priest, and King – tells us (just as surely as he tells the thief) that He will, He does remember us, and we will be with Him in Paradise.

With Christ as Lord of All – with Christ as Good Shepherd and King – we see Jeremiah's prophecy fulfilled in our own lives and in our own gathering, here, as God's people. God has reached out to us and restored us in this time and place. God has gathered us in and gathered us here, the sheep of his pasture, to be cared for. God has gathered us in and gathered us here, to be

his “shepherd-leaders ... [to take] good care of” his other sheep.<sup>ix</sup> God has gathered us in and gathered us here, reminding us that we are not alone but part of God’s people, each of us holy and called by name. God has gathered us in and gathered us here, to hear again that Christ is King; we are remembered; and we are members of the heavenly kingdom.

We are not strangers to our Lord. We call upon Him, “ADONI Sedaqnu – The LORD of our Righteousness,” and He restores us to right relationship with Him, with our families, with our neighbors and friends, with the city and land in which we live. He shines His light in the darkness of chaos and the darkness of our souls. He gives us hope in the despairs of this day and the despairs of our hearts. He is there, in the moment of obvious defeat, and proclaims ultimate triumph. Christ is King. God keeps the Promise. Alleluia. Amen.

---

i. The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins Publishers) 1993, Luke 23:43.

ii. *Ibid.*, Luke 23:42-43.

iii. Donald K. McKim. Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 1996, 224.

iv. John Guest. The Preacher’s Commentary: Jeremiah, Lamentations. Lloyd J. Ogilvie, ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1988, p. 160.

---

v. NRSV, Jeremiah 23:5-6. [*bracketed portion translated by pls from – Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, eds. (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft) 1997, Jeremia 23,6.]*

vi. McKim, 242.

vii. Guest, 160.

viii. *Ibid.*

ix. Eugene H. Peterson. The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress) 2002, Jeremiah 23, 1400.

**This sermon delivered by  
Rev. Phyllis Stutzman  
First Presbyterian Church  
2415 Clinton Parkway  
Lawrence, KS 66047**