

*“Prophets Show the Way”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2012

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Holy Scriptures: Jeremiah 33: 14-16    Luke 21: 25-36

**Jeremiah 33: 14-16**

14 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

**Luke 21: 25-36**

25 “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup> People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

29 Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup> as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. <sup>33</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34 “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, <sup>35</sup> like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

### Sermon

A tip of the cap to a good friend and excellent Disciples pastor Parker Cross.

In the early 1980's,

the Rev. Jesse Jackson campaigned for the U.S. Presidency.

A civil rights activist and community organizer,

Rev. Jackson was well known for his dynamic speeches and catchphrases,

including “I am somebody!” and “Keep hope alive!”

One weekend during the peak of the fall campaign,

Parker Cross was asked to babysit the two year old of a friend.

As Parker tells the story, his friend was überconservative.

So that weekend, just for fun,

every time Parker gave the two year old a cookie,

he would say to the child, "*Jesse Jackson for President.*"

Pushing him on the swing, Parker would say, "*Jesse Jackson for President.*"

You get the picture: 48 hours of subliminal seduction.

However, to Parker's disappointment, the kid would not repeat the phrase.

Not once.

When Sunday evening came, the parents returned to reclaim their son.

While driving home in their BMW,

the news came on the radio

and the broadcaster delivered an update on the presidential campaign.

The two year old, happily riding in his car seat behind the driver,

must have heard something familiar,

because he suddenly burst out,

*"Jesse Jackson for President! Jesse*

*Jackson for President!”*

Parker Cross said his friend told him later

that he was so surprised

he turned around to say, “What?!” and swerved the  
Beamer.

Keep hope alive.

We know how to give the gift of a sweater;

do we know how to give the gift of hope?

Are you like me, wondering what it takes to give someone the gift  
of hope?

There are some among us,

both a great cloud of witnesses and living souls in our  
midst,

who speak of hope and point us to the fulfillment of  
the promises of God.

We turn the Holy Scriptures for guidance on hope and hopefulness,

and along the way we discover the witness of the prophets.

The Holy Scriptures are theological documentation of God's loving activity.

The Holy Bible is replete with the stories and songs,  
prayers and praises of people's faith experiences.

Hannah tells how she met God in the Temple...

Peter preaches about a God who forgave him...

Bartimaeus says I was blind but now I see...

The Gerasene Demoniac says I was lost but now am found...

Lazarus says I was once dead to the world, and now I live in Christ...

Every soul in the Holy Scriptures says,

*"Friend, set yourself down and listen to my story. This is my gift to you.*

*You decide for yourself what it means. I'm simply a witness for hope."*

Keep hope alive.

Jeremiah was a witness for hope.

From the very beginning of Jeremiah's call to follow God,

he was commissioned to keep hope alive.

Jeremiah said, *Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,*

5 *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,*

*and before you were born I consecrated you;*

*I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”*

6 *Then I said,*

*“Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”*

7 *But the Lord said to me,*

*“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;*

*for you shall go to all to whom I send you,*

*and you shall speak whatever I command you.*

8 *Do not be afraid of them,*

*for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”*

9 *Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth;*

*and the Lord said to me,*

*“Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

10 *See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,*

*to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1: 4-10)*

This was no simple summons from the Lord.

Abraham Heschel pointed out that

*“the call to be a prophet is more than an invitation.*

*It is first of all a feeling of being enticed, of acquiescence or willing surrender.*

*But this winsome feeling is only one aspect of the experience.*

*The other aspect is a sense of being ravished or carried away by violence,*

*of yielding to an overpowering force against one’s will.*

*The prophet feels both the attraction and the coercion of God,*

*the appeal and the pressure,*

*the charm and the stress.*

*[The prophet] is conscious of both voluntary identification and forced capitulation.” [1]*

Jeremiah gave hope in a time of despair and desperation.

At some point in their lives most prophets are shunned or silenced or stoned to death.

Jeremiah's vocation as a prophet lasted some forty years.

He understood that the Hebrews would be in Babylon for a long, long time.

He encouraged his people to work where they were planted,

and to remember from whence they came and would one day return.

So Jeremiah preached hope.

Even and especially in the midst of what seems like despair,

he believed that God was nigh.

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord,*

*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 live in safety.*

*And this is the name by which it will be called:*

*"The Lord is our righteousness." (Jeremiah 33: 14-16)*



So live in the present. Be. Here. Now.

Keep hope alive.

Keep alive within you a vision for the future,

a confidence that the promise of God will be fulfilled.

No matter how desperate the times or situation,

God has not abandoned and will not abandon the people of  
God.

Trust in the promise – it is enough.

John Claypool tells the story of a conversation with a Jewish  
Rabbi,

who told him,

*“The only unforgiveable sin is despair, because  
despair denies God.”*

Hope affirms.

Despair denies.

Folks, the truth is that we don't know enough

to be negative or despondent or hopeless.

Trusting in God inspired Jeremiah to purchase land in Israel

even though he was in exile,

an outward act of an inner faith

that one day the Israelites would return to  
their homeland,

that God would lead them home.

We, too, have an outward act of an inner faith in the return of  
God's people.

The birth of Jesus Christ is God's investment in the human  
condition.

The birth of Christ in Bethlehem and in our lives is an act of hope.

This hope has been given to you.

We know how to give the gift of a sweater;

do we know how to give the gift of hope?

Are you like me, wondering what it takes to give someone the gift  
of hope?

Maybe the place to start is by asking ourselves who gave us hope.

Who gave you hope when you needed it most?

How did that happen? What's your story?

You who have received this gift, how do you then give it away?

Consider the circular nature of hope.

In the wedding ceremony and liturgy,

when we get to point of the exchange of rings,

I have an inner prayer that the Best Man will not be  
so nervous

that the rings get dropped and roll under the  
pews.

I also pause to listen because I enjoy the poetry and depth of the  
liturgy.

All present hear the pastor say:

*The ring is a symbol.*

*In marriage, it is the symbol of the uniting of two lives*

*in a holy venture which will last throughout life.*

*The ring symbolizes love because,*

*like the circular nature of love, it does not end.*

*It is, therefore, fitting that you bind your sacred vows*

*by the giving and receiving of a ring, a beautiful and meaningful symbol.*

Hope is circular.

We give and receive hope, a holy venture which will last throughout life.

Like the circular nature of love, hope does not end.

Keep hope alive.

Recently posters from World War II were uncovered in London that read:

“Stay Calm and Carry On”

Hope is not rescue.

Hope empowers, while rescue enables.

Dan Quayle put it so well: “If you give a person a fish, they'll fish for a day.

But if you train a person to fish, they'll fish for a lifetime.”

Being rescued is helpful in a pinch, it may feed you for a day,

but an emergency rescue may not sustain you for the long haul.

Being given the gift of hope is even better

than the Jelly of the Month Club;

it's the gift that keeps on giving.

Hope does not take over or dominate;

it empowers a soul to live into and take control over his or her own life.

Do you think you have what it takes to offer such a gift?

We know how to give the gift of a sweater;

do we know how to give the gift of hope?

Christ believes you do.

You and I have the power to empower in the name of Jesus Christ.

Imagine that you are invited, commissioned and called to be a prophet of hope.

*Then the Lord put out [a] hand and touched [your] mouth;*

*and the Lord said to [you],*

*“Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

*See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,*

*to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.”*

You give the gift of hope...

When you show you care

When you trust that the Lord will provide

When you are a touchstone for someone else

When you invest in the future

When you encourage someone to change, to grow, to keep  
the faith

When you offer words and deeds of empowerment

When you remind people that they are needed to live on, to  
be present,

that they are needed and appreciated

When you practice kindness, expecting nothing in return

I'm reminded of the B.C. comic strip from several years ago

in which cartoonist Johnny Hart has the character Wiley

searching for answers to one of life's great  
questions.

In the first panel Wiley asks, *“Whatever happened to kindness?”*

He then proceeds to write the following verse:

*“Why do people go to the trouble  
to give other people some trouble?  
Why do they burst someone’s bubble,  
when they now it comes back to them double?  
Why do we go to the effort to hurt  
someone we actually love?  
Why can’t we say something sweet ‘stead of curt?  
A push only leads to a shove.  
Why can’t we treat other folks with respect?  
With a smile or a kind word or two?  
Treat them with honor, the way you’d expect  
they should act when they’re dealing with you.  
Why can’t we overlook others’ mistakes?  
We’ve all surely been there before.  
Love and forgiveness is all that it takes,  
to boot Satan’s butt out the door.”*

Keep hope alive.

Being kind may be the first step to giving hope.

This Christmas season give a gift that will last,  
a gift that will endure long after you are gone. [2]

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

[1] Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets, Harper Press, 1962, Page 114

[2] Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R., Fresh Packet of Sower's Seeds, Third Planting, Paulist Press, 1994. Pp. 9-10.

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*"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." --Annie Dillard*