

## Jeremiah 33:14-16

Jeremiah was not what you would call a **popular** prophet. Throughout the nearly 50 years of his service to God as a prophet, Jeremiah prophesied **death** and **destruction** - **gloom** and **doom**. He denounced the people of Judah and Jerusalem because of their **idolatry** and **immorality**. Again and again he reminded them of how the 10 **Northern** Tribes of **Israel** had already been carried off into **captivity** because of their disobedience. But in spite of this recent and vivid reminder, the people in the Southern Kingdom of **Judah** continued in their **idolatrous** ways, and refused to admit that they were doing anything **wrong**. It was a **dangerous** practice, to say the least.

During the reign of King **Jehoiakim**, just a few years prior to our text, Jeremiah had warned the people, *“The LORD Almighty says this, ‘Because you have **not listened** to My words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and My servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon ... This whole country will become a desolate **wasteland**, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon **seventy years**.’”* God’s message was **clear** - the Israelites would be utterly **defeated** by the Babylonians. Some time later, Jeremiah even counseled King Zedekiah to **surrender** to the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, rather than to stubbornly remain behind the walls of the city of Jerusalem only to die by **war**, **famine**, and **disease**. But again, he and the self-righteous people of Judah **refused** to **listen**. They considered Jeremiah’s fervent warnings to be just so much **hot air**! Their mistake was a **fatal** one.

The once proud and mighty Children of Israel would soon hit **rock bottom**. Their immediate future held nothing in store for them but **disaster**. Yet, God enabled Jeremiah to see **beyond** the immediate future, and even beyond the seventy years of **captivity** in Babylon, to a **better** time - a time when God would **restore** His people. To anyone who would **listen** - and without a doubt the listeners were **few** - Jeremiah proclaimed, *“The Branch Is Coming.”* At a time when the Children of Israel were quickly sinking away into **quicksand**, you would think that they would have been **happy** to hear about a **branch** to grab hold of! But they had sunk so **deeply** into sin, and had drifted so **far** from the LORD, that they simply refused to recognize any **truth** which came from the lips of God’s **prophet**, Jeremiah.

Yet, whether they **believed** it or **not**, the Branch **would** come. God said, *“In*

*those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line.*" But, how could that **be**? David's line was practically **dead** right now. They were living in the **last days** of the kingdom. With the death of King Zedekiah and his sons, the last vestiges of David's family would be **gone**, and the entire family tree of David would in effect be **cut down**. The fall of this once mighty tree would indeed be **horrifying** to behold. First of all, Zedekiah would see **Jerusalem** fall - a city which had been considered **unconquerable** for centuries. Then he would witness the **murder** of his two sons. And finally, with those memories boldly emblazoned on his **memory**, the Babylonians would put out the **eyes** of Zedekiah, and carry him off in **chains** to **die** in Babylon. He was to be the **last** of the kings of Judah from **David's** line - at least for the time being. The family of **David** - the royal house of **Judah** which had once been as stately and majestic as a mighty **oak** - was being **cut down**, and only a **stump** would remain.

However, you and I know that there is **more** to a tree than its **trunk**, **branches**, and **leaves**. In fact, there is as much of the tree **below** the ground in its complicated system of **roots**, as there is **above** the ground. It was from the roots of that dead stump, that a **branch** - a **shoot** - would come up. God would cause **new life** to come forth out of **death**. This shoot would start out small, weak, and tender - just a little **twig** which could easily be broken off. Some of you may have noticed that I have a little maple tree growing in my back yard right next to the raspberry patch. When we moved here there was a big maple tree out there, but it got hit by lightning. So, after that one was cut down, this one sprouted up. So far, it's about 5 feet tall, and it's growing quite rapidly. Back in Wonevoc I did the same thing with an **elm** tree - back in Hutchinson, MN, it was another **maple** - and back in Milwaukee it was a **horse chestnut** tree. The last time I saw that tree in Milwaukee was in the summer of 1997, when I had the opportunity to preach for the 150th anniversary of Salem Congregation. At that time the **stump** was completely **gone**, but the **branch** was still **growing**. In fact, it had become a pretty good sized tree, and perhaps some day **all** of these trees will be as **large**, and as **strong**, and as **useful** as their **predecessors** had been. Perhaps they will even be **better**.

In our text, the promise which God had made through Jeremiah, to send a living **Branch** out of the dead **stump** of Jesse, started out looking pretty **frail** and **vulnerable**. Indeed, with the Babylonians continuing to rise in power, and with Judah and all the surrounding nations condemned to **destruction**, how could there be any **hope** in the land at all? Well, the prophecy said, "*In those days Judah will*

*be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety.*” But after they had been defeated and led away into captivity, **how** could Judah be saved? And after it had been conquered and lay in ruins, **how** could Jerusalem live in safety? It wasn’t **possible**, was it? **None** of those things could ever **happen**, could they? No - it didn’t seem **likely** at all. It must have been just the **ranting** and **raving** again of that lunatic, Jeremiah!

Who in their right mind, would have believed that Jeremiah had the **answer** to their problem? Certainly not the vast **majority** of the people of Judah and Jerusalem. They didn’t even know what their real problem **was**. They were worried about hoards of conquering **invaders**. They were worried about losing their **city**. They were worried about leaving behind their hard-earned **homes** and **possessions**. But, their real problem was **sin** and **idolatry** - and unfortunately, they **weren’t** worried about that! The people didn’t want to **hear** the preaching of Jeremiah, because he wanted them to **repent** of their sins. He had the **audacity** to tell them to **desert** their false gods, and to return to the one **true** God. That’s **not** what they wanted to **hear**. They had become so **steeped** in sin, that they didn’t even **want** to **escape** from its grasp. And so, they **would not** escape - they would **die** in their sins.

But thanks be to God, there would be a **remnant** - a small minority - who would come to their **senses** during those 70 years of captivity. And for **their** sake, the LORD would remain **faithful** to His promise! Who would have **dreamed** that it would take almost 600 years before the promise would be **fulfilled**? And when it was, who could have imagined that the **solution** to their real problem would be provided by a tiny **infant**, born in a **stable** in Bethlehem? In reality, it didn’t take **dreams** and **imagination** at all, because God had promised, “*The days are coming ... I will make a **righteous Branch** ... He will do what is just and right ... Judah will be saved ... Jerusalem will live in safety.*” And whatever God **promises**, must **happen**.

We too can **rest secure** in the promises of our God. No matter what the **odds** are against us, no matter how **hopeless** things may seem, we know that some 2,000 years ago, God provided us with the **solution** to our problems - including the problem of **sin**. God gave us the **Branch** and said, “*This is the name by which it will be called: **The LORD Our Righteousness.***” On this First Sunday in Advent, we are preparing to celebrate the coming of that Branch once again on Christmas Day. As we anxiously await the arrival of the LORD our Righteousness, let us

**prepare** ourselves by heeding the **preaching** of the Prophet Jeremiah, and turning away from **idolatry** and **sin** in our lives. Such idolatry can **destroy** us, and it can show itself in so many different **ways** - like getting caught up in the **pattern** of this world - or loving anyone or anything **more** than we love our **God** - or even being too **stubborn** to let go of **sin** in our lives, so that we can take hold of the **Branch**, who is able to **save** us from destruction.

There is a story about a man who had spent his lifetime searching for a tremendously valuable **jewel**. Ultimately, he **found** the jewel, and when he did, he clasped his hand around it and wouldn't **let go**. He wouldn't trust its safety to **anything** except his own hand. The story goes that as the man was running to return to his home, he got too close to the edge of a **cliff**, and fell **over**. However, good fortune was with him, because just as he began to slide down the side of the cliff, he was able to grab onto the protruding **root** of a tree. Good fortune continued to be with him as he called out for **help**, and was **heard** by some passing hikers. They lowered a **branch** for him to grab onto so they could pull him **out**. But the man **wouldn't** grab on. His hands were **full**. If he let go of the **root**, he would fall to his **death**, but if he let go of the **jewel**, he would lose the **possession** he prized more than **anything**. The story concludes when the man's strength finally **gives out**, his fingers **slip** off from the root, and he **plummets** to his demise.

That's **not** a very **happy** story. But you know, when it comes to our **salvation**, if we were left to **ourselves**, we would **all** make the **wrong** choice - and we **too** would **perish**, just like the man in the story - just like Judah, Jerusalem, the surrounding nations, and even mighty Babylon itself. We would **not** take hold of the **Branch**. But by God's **grace**, **He** has taken control. He has **planted** a Branch in our lives - lives which were previously **useless**, and **dead** in trespasses and sin. May that Branch, **Jesus Christ**, not only take **root** in our lives; but may our **faith** in Him continue to grow ever **stronger**, **healthier**, and **more fruitful** as well. Amen.