

Jeremiah 33:14-16
God in the Rubble
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Sheila Franklin looks dead into my eyes. “Rubble,” she waves her arm pointing to a pile of bricks that used to be a laundry mat, “my life is a pile of rubble.” Her teenage, middle school, and toddler children are living in different suburbs around Chicago and downstate Illinois with foster families. They haven’t spoken or touched in months, years for the older kids.

As the water in her life rose from her ankles to her knees to her chest to her neck eventually the water reached her mouth and too much of life caused her to start to drown.

The pressure of making ends meet.

The pressure of taking care of her children.

The pressure of caring for her mother.

The hardness of family and friends who turned their backs when the going got tough.

The carelessness of men who would love and leave.

She went from an occasional drink to drinking every day, to a couple times a day, to not being able to cope without the bottle. Sometimes she gets high with her drinking. Her skin is changing—growing more and more ashen seemingly by the day. Her eyes have a redness to them where they once were white.

She looks in my eyes. I’m not so sure she really wants to hear anything I have to say and any word of encouragement seems so trivial when compared to the mess that her life has become. She takes a swig from her bottle and then another, she motions with her hand again towards the pile of bricks. “Rubble.”

Nearly every drop of ink in the Bible was written and recorded in times when the people of God and their great city, Jerusalem, was reduced to rubble. Surrounding empires Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Greece, and Rome took their turn rolling over them, rolling thru them, and placing the boot of empire firmly on the neck of the people of God.

The God of the Bible, then, is one who speaks, inspires, moves, loves, lives, and interacts with a people in times of hardship when life has crumbled down around them. In today’s passage Jeremiah prophesied from a jail, and he prophesied about the loss, hardship, and grief that the people of God would face. Jeremiah prophesies covered in the dust of a city in ruins.

Walter Brueggemann writes, “Jeremiah lived in a time of turmoil. He believed it was a time of dying. He envisioned the death of a culture, a society, a tradition. The dying seemed so clear, so inexorable.”

It wasn’t popular to tell the people of God that their way of life was dying. But Jeremiah saw it all too clear. Before their city was destroyed he told them....

If you turn from God and do things your way...things ain’t gonna go so well.

If you rely on your money. You will lose who you are.

If you rely on your politics. You will lose who you are.

If you rely on bargaining power over and against building community—getting over on people. You will lose who you are.

He preached that message loud, and he preached it frequently.

But the people of God put their trust in princes,
they put their trust in politics,
they put their trust in their privilege.

The people that God had led out of slavery and who made a way, when there was no way, had lost their way.

In Jeremiah 5:26-28 describes the state of his people, "Among my people are the wicked who lie in wait like men who snare birds and like those who set traps to catch people. Like cages full of birds their houses are full of deceit; they have become rich and powerful and have grown fat and sleek. Their evil deeds have no limit. They do not seek justice. They do not promote the case of the fatherless. They do not defend the cause of the poor."

And God sends Jeremiah to come along and say, "Hey, you gotta get right! I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery. You have turned from being a people about life and become a people about death. Get it right, people of God or you are going down...."

And the people don't listen. Matter of fact they lock Jeremiah up in prison for telling them the truth. And still Jeremiah says...God isn't gonna be played with.

And sure enough. They didn't stop turning from God. And they were invaded by the Babylonian empire. Their temple demolished. Some of their people dragged away into slavery. Some under the foot of occupation.

They were reduced to rubble.

And Jeremiah says, it's because you turned from God.

I'm not sure there is anything more ugly than prescribing the pain and hurts and misfortunes of people who are suffering on some moral failure. The idea of a God who dishes out suffering to the people he loves as the result or punishment of some sin or some moral failure in our lives, doesn't square with the character of God throughout the Bible.

That being said. There is however, something about God in the Bible, certainly in the prophetic witness of the Bible that says...when you turn from away from God and God's way...there is judgement, and pain, and isolation, and a life disconnected from the blessing that is the faith community-an impoverished life.

If you turn this way...this will happen.

If you turn this way...this will happen.

I've seen grandmothers look their young grandsons in the eyes and say...if you live a life on the streets...you will die. The streets will kill you. The streets don't care nothing about you. If you live on the streets...you will die or end up in prison. But...if you stay in church and in school and with your family...you will live.

And of course that is not 100% fail proof, but that's not the point. The point is the overwhelming truth that is being conveyed and I can attest...

I have the held hands of those grandmothers as their grandsons have walked across the stage of graduations and seen some go on to do great things. And I have held the hands of grandmothers at their teenage grandsons' gravesites.

If you do this. This will happen.

If you do this. This will happen.

God gives the people of God a covenant and an ethic to live by. They break that covenant and violate that ethic. And in God's judgement there is real suffering. That's where we find them today. Rubble.

And for 29 chapters...in the book of Jeremiah...God rails and rails judgement, anger, and suffering against the people of God. For 29 chapters Jeremiah paints the picture of a God who has been hurt. God sounds like a marital partner who has been publicly humiliated.

But then... after 29 chapters.... It's as if God takes a deep breath, it's as if the heart of God turns. God, still angry, that the people have turned from him...sees their suffering, their pain, their hurt, and God says in chapter 30 verse 12. "Your wound is incurable. Your injury beyond healing. There is no one to plead your case. No remedy for your sore. No healing for you. You have no allies...they have forgotten you."

And in the very same breath that God speaks of the people being incurable and without hope to ever be healed...in the very same breath in verse 17 God begins a speech that goes on for 3 chapters with a whole bunch of "I will's,"

I will restore you to health.

I will heal your wounds.

I will add.

I will bring honor.

I have and will love you.

I will lead to waters.

I will turn your mourning to dancing.

I will be you God.

I will forgive.

I will bring health.

I will heal.

I will cleanse.

And finally, the exclamation point to God's renewing the covenant, is in the passage today where God says to his incurable people living in a rubble: "The days are coming, when I will fulfill the promise I made to my people. I will be your God. You will be my people. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous branch sprout from David's line. He will do what is just and right in the land."

For finally, the last word from God to his people. People that have turned away. People that have broken covenant. People that have an incurable wound. People that cannot save themselves. People that are suffering.

The last word is twofold....

It is that God is with us.

I will still be your God and you will be my people.

And that a new day is coming.
A day where justice will reign.
A day when one will come who bring justice and righteousness.
A day is coming.

The promise is... God is with us. And a new day is coming.

For those hearing the words that a sprout from David's line would come had to sound like foolishness.
The monarchy was a failure. David's line a public broken joke.

Stan Mast writes, "This points ahead to the fullness of time when God sent forth his Son, the greater Son of David to do precisely what God promised here in Jeremiah 33, but in a greater way than Jeremiah or any of this contemporaries and countrymen could have imagined. This promise was not limited to Israel's future prosperity and security. Indeed, much of Israel rejected Jesus because he did not restore the fortunes of Israel in the way our text seems to promise. Instead, Jesus restored the Kingdom of God to the whole world and is in the process of bringing that Kingdom to the fruition promised here in Jeremiah 33."

God is with us. And a new day is coming.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means coming. We light a candle each week to represent the coming of Christ. God is with us. And a new day is coming.

I wonder; and I invite you to wonder with me. If that for today could be enough. To a world that can feel so dark and lonely...if a little advent hope that God is with us and a new day is coming is enough. If the simple reminder that is God is with us and a new day in Christ Jesus is coming—could be enough.

Most times, I want more. Assurances. Proof. Security. Reasons for suffering. A clear way out or forward.

But I've found other times, where on my pile of rubble, or in the darkness, or looking at dead branch hoping a sprout will grow, pick a metaphor, I found, sometimes it is enough to be simply be reminded and assured that God has not turned from us, but in Christ Jesus, God is with us...and hoping and praying for the faith, imagination, and Holy Spirit strength to work in community towards a new day coming.

Maybe this morning it is enough for us to hear one more time, that God is with us and to look to the advent light of Christ that indeed a new day is coming.

Something remarkable has happened over the last 4 months at Roseland Christian Ministries. We used to have 25-40 people for lunch every day. Now there are 65-75 most days by the time we are done serving.

Many are homeless. Many are undiagnosed with mental health disorders. Some are afflicted with addictions. Some are recovering. Some are forgotten and disconnected. Some are paroles who have just got out of jail.

But our numbers have doubled over the past 4 months. We scratch our heads. Why? No other shelters or food programs in the neighborhood closed down. We didn't change the menu. Food is the same. Nothing has changed.

Except, everything has changed, before we eat, all of staff stops what they are doing. Doesn't matter if you are the janitor, the front desk, the development director, or the pastor and we join everybody. We stop what we are doing and we get in a big circle. It's a great big beautiful circle. And we go around and we say our names and we share. The topic changes day to day...but we say our names and a different topic...best thanksgiving memory...favorite food...funniest story.

But for people, many of whom nobody knows their names anymore...to say their names out loud. To have people remember their names—because no one has called it out in so long. Maybe they have been a number in prison or in a social service line. To have people honor some memory by listening.

Means something more than the meal of the day.

Folks straighten up a little bit.

Chin gets lifted a little higher.

We do it, not just because it's nice to learn people's names and build people's self-esteem. But we do it as a way to remind folks sitting on some pretty big piles of rubble and maybe even to remind ourselves.

That God cares enough to send people to be in it together.

Cares enough to call us by name.

Cares enough send some folks to learn other's names.

We do it to remember that in faith community God is still with us. And maybe it even gives us a glimpse of a vision of that new day coming.

Where there is justice, safety. Where everybody matters.

Good work for our gifts to be used. Belonging.

Where our stories matter.

The good news from Jeremiah.

The good news of Jesus Christ this advent season.

Is that God is with you. Even now. God is with us.

And, indeed, a new day is coming.

Amen.