

Jeremiah 33: 14-22

Promises

It's the first Sunday of Advent, but we're starting before the beginning, and at a fairly unlikely time in the history of the lineage of Abraham. In Jeremiah's time the house of David was not in such great shape. David and Solomon were long gone and Israel was already broken in two, Judah was all that remained of the once promised land, and it would not be long before even that was wiped out by the Babylonian Empire to the east. Jeremiah, maybe except for Hosea, has the worst job of all the prophets, he has to live through all the doom and gloom that he predicts, and he predicts quite a lot. So maybe it's for his own sanity that he also offers hope in the midst of his dire warnings: there will be a righteous branch.

One of the things that is rather important about reading the prophets every now and again, is the way they can brace you against being silly and naïve, but also the way in which, if you pay attention, they will also call you to hope. The warnings can be like a slap of cold water, but there is always hope, always, even in Jeremiah. But Jeremiah is past the point where he can even believe that the hope comes from people actually listening to the warnings, that's long gone, the destruction is coming, the pruning hook is sharp and already poised, things as they were are going to cease. But the covenant will not be null and void.

In the Rioja region of Spain, they have these vineyards full of really old vines, in some cases centuries old. In the spring, when we were walking, the stumps of some of these vines look very dead, but you can tell by what the farmers are doing, they will not be that way for long, by summer those gnarled old stumps will have sent out vines, righteous branches that will bear fruit even in the scorching heat of summer, because the old vines have sunk their roots deep into the earth. The old vines get pruned in the winter to make room for new growth. I think the prophets reflect the balance of life and death in a way that does not lose sight of hope, and that's important. That balance is present in a lot of what Jesus taught his disciples, particularly when they started to get anxious about trials and tribulations.

It's tempting to think, when things start to shudder and shake, when things look dire and even dead, that the end is upon us. How have we fallen so far from the promise of resurrection? Sometimes things do get pruned back, and when it happens it looks bad for sure, Jeremiah knew all about that. But he also understood that the roots of the vine had not been shaken, the righteousness of God would and will sustain us. He reminds Israel that it is actually not within their capability to break the covenant with God, because the covenant was made by God, not by them. God establishes a covenant with us in the same unshakeable way he established day and night, by the words of pure love that makes everything.

This is one of the key elements of both Judaism and Christian faith that gets repeatedly lost and re-discovered: it is God's faithfulness, not ours that is the deep root of our hope. In fact, Jeremiah points out that it is utterly foolish to think that we can actually do anything to break God's faithfulness. The Exile that was coming, the twists and turns of history, whatever happens cannot shake God's faithfulness. I find that to be absolutely comforting in the midst of trouble: we fall down, God picks us up; we sin, God forgives; we lose our way, God finds us; we break, God heals; we despair, God hopes for us. Nothing in the stories of the Scripture should lead us to believe that the pruning won't happen, or that things will not, at some point, seem very dead. But the promise is always there: a righteous branch, a star of hope, an empty tomb, a reformation, a great awakening, a revival, a resurrection and things begin to grow again.