

28 November 2021

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

Advent 1, Dare we Imagine?

First Mennonite Church

Is having an imagination is a dangerous thing? I ask this question because Jeremiah imagines three things:

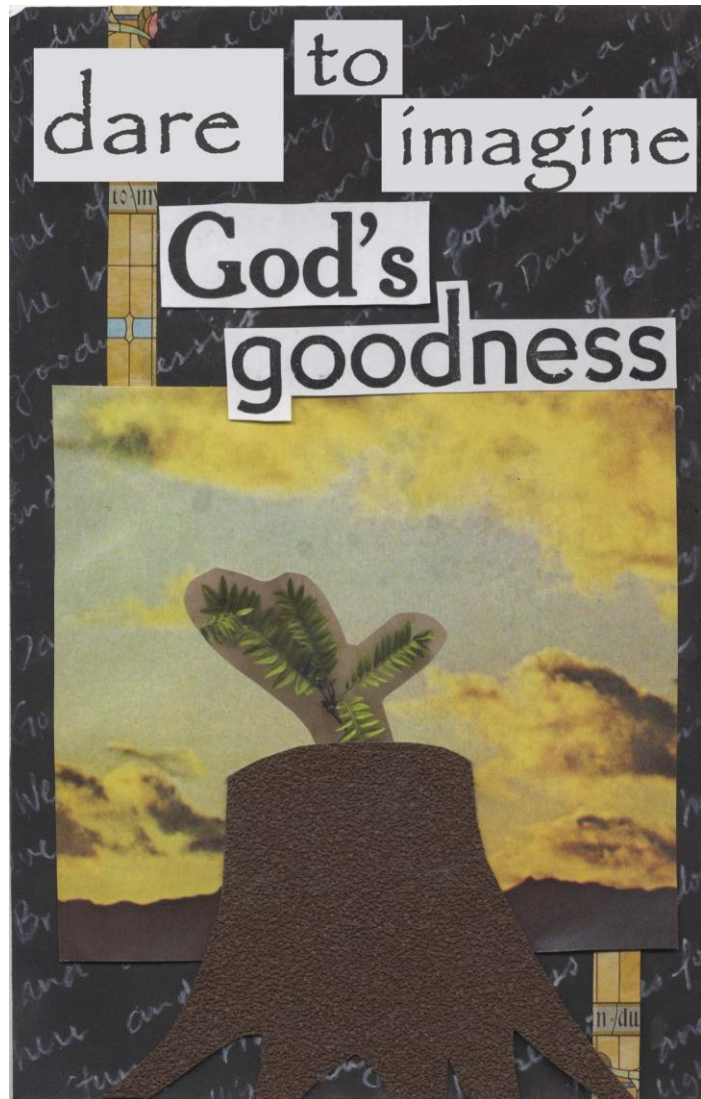
1. He imagines a day—the days are surely coming—when God will fulfil the promise made to Israel and Judah.
2. Jeremiah imagines a day when a righteous branch will spring up and execute justice and righteousness in the land.
3. Jeremiah imagines a day when Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety.

The problem with Jeremiah's imagination was that it ran up right against a short but powerful word called, reality. What was Jeremiah's and Israel's reality?

God called Jeremiah to be a prophet to God's people in a turbulent and dangerous time when the kingdom of Judah was threatened by the mighty Babylonians. Babylon, by the way, is in modern day Iraq, just south of present-day Bagdad. God said to Jeremiah,

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 1:10).

To pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow—the main reason God called Jeremiah was to speak Israel into Babylonian exile. Jeremiah was called to warn the people of Israel that God was going to dismantle Israel, Judah,





Jerusalem, and the Temple. In 586 BCE, Jeremiah's warning came to fruition as the invading Babylonian armies reduced Jerusalem and the Temple, the centre of all holy life, to rubble, killed or took into exile all the royal family, priests, prophets and most of the population.

This was the reality. The response to the devastation was heart-breaking. Where was God

amid this devastation? Had Israel not believed that God resided in the holy Temple within the holy city? Was God defeated by the Babylonian god, Marduk? Was Marduk more powerful than the God Israel believed had created the heavens and the earth? Was Marduk stronger than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Was the God who defeated the Egyptian Pharaoh and delivered the Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt no match for the mighty Babylonians?

The reality for Israel in 586 BCE was stark and simple: All hope was lost. God abandoned his people. Psalm 137 described the devastation this way:

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)

I imagine this sense of hopelessness and despair come upon people who lose everything in war and conflict and must flee for their lives. I imagine

hopelessness and despair come upon those who lose everything to fire or flood.

A year ago, when I was in Manitoba, I went to visit some friends. They have a son who graduated in June 2020 in the early part of the Pandemic lockdown and stay-at-home orders. Not only were his graduation plans completely wrecked but so was his immediate future. Matthew had plans, dreams of going to Canadian Mennonite University and its semester abroad programme, called Outtatown. His dreams were snuffed out by Covid.

His parents said Matthew felt depressed and hopeless about his future, finding it hard to imagine his life beyond the pandemic. And with the latest variant coming out of southern Africa, it's looking like it won't end soon.

Have conversations with teenagers and you may find this to be true. Teenagers and young people have deep concerns not only about their vocational futures, but also about their future on this planet. The human species isn't doing enough to slow down the profoundly negative effects of climate change. And many despair when they cast their glance into the future.

This is reality. Yet, during Israel's darkest hour, God dares Jeremiah to look up, dares Jeremiah to **imagine more than just what is to what will be**. In turn, Jeremiah dares to imagine God doing a new thing. Dares to imagine God restoring a just king to the throne, dares to imagine a righteous branch springing up out of the lifeless and hopeless soil of Israel's story.

There is a tendency for Christians to look upon passages like these in Jeremiah as predictions of the future. We often assume the Hebrew prophets predicted the future. I say no. **This passage is NOT a prediction, but it is rather, a promise.** Yes. A promise. When everything in the world is falling apart, when darkness seems to be the order of the day, when hope in our institutions that look so spectacular are gone and there is nothing left, it's God's promise to which Israel clings. These words in Jeremiah are promises rooted in a profound faith and confidence in the promise-maker. Paul in Romans says, *God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist"* (Romans 4:17). And it was from the position of faith and trust that Jeremiah spoke. He refused to believe the present circumstances were the last word on human destiny. He was able to imagine God doing something good in the future.

Is having imagination a dangerous thing? Yes. In their own way, Israel's prophets all dared to imagine God doing something new and good in the world. The prophet Micah's dared to imagine God's creating the conditions

where people will *all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid* (Micah 4:4).

The prophet Isaiah dared to imagine God's world as a place where the nations would *beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore* (Isaiah 2:4).

At another time, Isaiah dares to imagine God's world as a place where:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them* (Isaiah 11:6).

So, if anyone objects to Jeremiah's imagination of Jerusalem as a restored and thriving city where children are playing, and people are living and thriving as just a bunch of pie-in-the-sky thinking, then one must ask the intellectual question, just whose reason is being applied here? Whose definition of reality is being applied. I mean, is this world so fixed and closed that nothing can change? Is it realistic to foresee a time when ruined cities are restored? **Well, it all depends on what sort of world we live in.**

In Luke's gospel, Jesus talked about the coming of the Son of Man in graphic and apocalyptic terms. He did so because right before this there are two important stories. One is the story of a poor widow giving everything she has to the Temple followed by people marvelling at the beauty and opulence of the Temple. This story of the widow is often used when talking about financial stewardship. "Look at what this widow gave", we say. "She gave everything she had. Surely, we can give some of what we have to the church." The problem is that this story really isn't about the generosity of the widow. It's about a religious institution that is so corrupt and evil that it will squeeze everything out of a poor widow leaving her completely destitute. When Jesus hears people marvelling at the beauty and opulence of the Temple, he speaks of its destruction. Then when the disciples want to know when this will take place, he warns them about misplaced faith. Never put your faith and trust in a building or institution, no matter how opulent or gorgeous they are. Rather place it in a person, the Son of Man who is coming to make all things right.

We are a people who are following this person. We are living in God's world. We are a people who already know how God's story will end. You may recall that in the book of Ephesians, God's plan is to gather up all things in Christ,

things in heaven and things on earth. Everything will be gathered up by God to be reconciled and restored to how God intended it from the dawn of creation. The book of Revelation speaks of the complete transformation of heaven and earth—a new heaven and a new earth.

If this is God’s plan, how then do we live in God’s world? I dare say that if we’re going to live and thrive, we need bold imagination!

As we await the arrival of Christ can we dare to imagine what God’s goodness awaits us unexpectedly just around the corner? On this first Sunday of Advent, I’d urge you to pause at least once a day this week and ask yourself: “Where have I seen signs of God’s goodness lately in my life and in my community?” Trust me, this will bring you way more hope, joy, peace, and love than any of those apparently amazing discounts those big box stores give you today! Perhaps God’s goodness is found in...

- A kind words from a stranger at the grocery store
- The warm glow of lit candles in your dark home reminding you that the “Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”
- A loved one or friend apologizing and seeking forgiveness, and the joy you felt when the relationship was restored
- The feeling of deep gratitude during visits with your family or close friends
- Maybe you went through a very dark time in your life and a friend came alongside and cared

We can probably all remember a time when we sensed the goodness of God. Remembering these past stories can help us dare to imagine something new.

Not only do I urge you to see the goodness of God in your life and community, but I **urge you to be** the goodness of God with those in your life and in your community.

- Offering words of comfort to someone you know who is having a hard day
- Buying an extra item of food at the grocery store and donating it to the Food Bank
- Seeking to restore a relationship with an estranged family member or friend
- Send an email or card of encouragement to someone who you know could use it
- I was vaccinated against Covid to protect myself, my loved ones, and the community of which I’m a member. I also did it because I wanted to give young people, like Matthew, a bit of hope that the more people are vaccinated, the closer we will be to ending the pandemic. This is also

why the Suderman household donated to UNICEF and their “Love my Neighbour” campaign. This campaign will provide the Covid-19 vaccine to vulnerable people in countries that don’t have the incredible privileges we have in this country.

I imagine there are some of us who are living with much mental stress and anxiety, perhaps a great deal of physical or chronic pain. It’s almost impossible to cast your glance up and away from all the stuff that is overwhelming you. But try, as hard as it will be to cast your glance up away from yourself and look at the goodness of God in another person. Can you see it? Can you, even in your current state, be, even in a tiny way, the goodness of God to others?

Have you ever seen signs of God’s goodness in your life and in the life of your community? If you have, then you can dare to imagine God’s goodness that is yet to come!

I know it is so easy to be overwhelmed by what is not good in our world — from racial injustices to intense political polarization to a pandemic that is not over to the mounting effects of climate change...and so much more!

I remind you of the candle Briyith lit today. You look at it and it seems so small and insignificant. A bit of wind will put it out. Yet, it still burns. And if you place that small, tiny candlelight in a dark room it will immediately light up.

This Advent we are waiting for God to show up, waiting for God to finally set things right, to bring justice, to restore creation. Restore us. Restore the universe. Remember how God showed up that first Christmas? As a tiny baby, a tiny candle in a dark and foreboding world. Imagine the goodness of God. Go, be the light. Go be the goodness of God to others this week. Amen.