

A Righteous Branch

Because of my dad's military career I was privileged to live in the Philippines as a teenager. The country was beautiful



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and the people warm, but there were still scars on the land from WW II and the remains of rusting tanks and heavy war equipment dotted the countryside. I delivered the "Pacific Stars and Stripes" newspaper on Clarke Air Force Base. One of my customers was a gracious Pilipino woman, married to an American NCO. She was often waiting for me with a Coke in hand and instructions to sit down and cool off for a few moments. She told me stories of when the Japanese invaded during WW II, their cruelty and murder of women and children and the hopelessness of those days. When I asked how she survived, she said simply that there comes a time when you have nothing but faith in God and you pray.

Jeremiah lived in that kind of time. Jerusalem was facing ruin, God's Temple was about to be destroyed, the land could hardly be described as "promised," and the majority of the Jews were facing exile in a foreign county ruled by a pagan dictator. Read the tragic events that great prophet records in the book that bears his name.

Jeremiah was arrested in the Temple court and the priest Peshar had him placed in public stocks for ridicule. When he prophesied the destruction of the Temple, the priests and other prophets called for Jeremiah's execution. Jeremiah acted out the impending domination of Israel by Babylon by wearing a wooden animal yoke. The false prophet Hananiah forcibly took the yoke, broke it, and declared Jeremiah a liar. Unbowed, Jeremiah declared the wooden yoke would become like iron in cruel persecution and that Hananiah would be dead within the year.

Israel's rebellion became even more pronounced as King Jehoiakim personally burned the scroll of God's message that had been written down by Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch. Days became months, months became years, and the

tragic darkness seemed to obliterate the hope of God's love and deliverance. But Jeremiah never gave up on the God who loves his people.

In spite of rejection and threats, in spite of ruin and hopelessness, Jeremiah saw a future day when "The voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord: 'Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first'" (v. 11).

Perhaps we are no more ready to believe God's promises than when there is nothing left but faith in God and prayer. Jeremiah centered his message on the coming of a "righteous Branch" (Jer. 23:5-6) who will descend from the line of King David, in whom God's people will find true security. Curiously, King Zedekiah's name means "The Lord is our righteousness" (33:16), but that symbolic name was denied by Zedekiah's actions. No earthly king can be the fulfillment of Jeremiah's pronouncement.

The people, as did the prophet, longed for a king like David, but God offered a promise that exceeded human understanding and limits. Read all the Old Testament prophets and you will see glimpses of God's promises that become reality in Jesus Christ. A day is coming, Jeremiah declares, "When the Lord will fulfill this promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... in those days, at that time I will cause the righteous branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land ... this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness'" (vv. 15-16). Note there is no mention of political or military power in this promise, for it is a promise only made possible by God's grace beyond any human ability.

The New Testament was formulated in a world dominated by corrupt pagan power, when emperors were depicted as god's who would bring peace and prosperity to the world. Sounds too much like our world of modern politics! The Jews found

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relative security as they played the game of politics with Rome, while they waited for a political/military deliverer like King David to appear. The Jewish leaders failed to understand God's promise and so did not see Jesus as God's "righteous branch." Jesus had no interest in building a worldly kingdom. He came to give us God's ultimate gift of life, not limited by nationalistic borders or political government. Such kingdoms are no better than the kingdom Jeremiah watched crumble.

The promise of God, from the Garden of Eden until the present, continues to be love, forgiveness and a new beginning that has no end. Jesus called himself "Son of Man," meaning "one of us." The New Testament reveals the heart of God as Jesus reached out to all kinds of people: rich, poor, afflicted, grieving, demon possessed, scholars of the Law, women, children and people of other races or ethnicity.

WW II is a faint memory from my childhood, but I have known many people who survived its tragedies. I have known Hmong refugees who escaped death by the communists and came to our nation after Vietnam fell to begin a new life. I have known Jews who escaped Nazi Germany to find a new life in America. Their stories began with tragedy and hopelessness, but end and begin again with hope.

All around us are people who know darkness in their world through poverty, racial tensions, illness and violence. Jeremiah speaks out of darkness, his words shaped in pain, his message vibrant with God's promises. The "weeping prophet" points us to the coming of Jesus, to the hope of Christmas. As we light the second candle of the advent wreath may we focus our thoughts on God's love in Christ. May we act out of that love, offering compassion for those who are alone or suffering, offering encouragement to those who live in darkness and offering the healing of God's grace to those who feel broken. Jeremiah's prophesy of a "righteous branch" has become reality in Jesus, who is God's tangible love.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.