Advent 1, Dec 2: Jeremiah 33:14–16

Other Lessons: Psalm 25:1–10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13; Luke 19:28–40

You’ve heard me say this before and you will probably hear me say this every year, that it never fails to amaze me how eager people are in preparing for Christmas, even before the church. It isn’t a bad thing necessarily, it’s just odd, like seeing a fully decorated Christmas tree more than a month before Christmas, which is what I saw the first week when I was in Hong Kong (I think it was a restaurant). And near my home last week, they finished setting up these lights with the big “Merry Christmas” in Chinese on the streets, except that they haven’t actually light them up, probably not until December. People are getting ready for Christmas, that is, the festivities, the excitement, the foods, the parties, the public holidays, the shoppings before and after, etc. People are getting ready, but are they really ready?

To prepare for Christmas is not merely knowing the original events of the birth of Jesus and/or understanding the original meaning of the incarnation, but it’s a question of how to receive the Christ, for he will not come again as a helpless baby, so cutely lying in a manger surrounded by animals and shepherds, looking so calm and peaceful, as depicted in our Christmas cards. That’s why you might find it strange that the gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent is the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (instead of something that relates to the birth of Christ). The people there in Jerusalem also rejoiced, but were they really ready for what’s about to come within that week?

What does it mean for the church, for us Christians to enter into this season of Advent, which leads to Christmas? What does our forefathers in the faith want us to learn and practice? Our old testament text for today provides some hints for us to consider.

Our text begins with God’s own words to Jeremiah: Behold! Look! Pay attention! because days are coming when the promise of God will be fulfilled, that is, he would bring salvation to his people. But this word of future promise at the same time urges the hearers to look and consider their present condition. Indeed, the words would seem contradictory to the prophet as he was imprisoned by the king of Judah. Jeremiah tells us in the previous chapter that this series of revelation from God occurred just one year before the fall of Jerusalem. The land was already desolated and Jerusalem is under siege by the Babylonians. They have not been able to stop the advancing enemies. God himself has promised utter destruction of the city and of its inhabitants. It was only a matter of time, 1 year, that is, until this comes to fulfillment. Jeremiah had been prophesying destruction, that’s why he’s imprisoned by his own king. All this because of the people’s sin and rebellion and hardened and unrepentant hearts. They have failed to turn to God for forgiveness. And now God has left them to be destroyed.

But as he sat in despair and bewilderment, wondering if God has abandoned his people, God spoke to him these great words of promise. And notice that God reminds Jeremiah of the promise God made not only with Judah, but also with the northern nation of Israel which was already destroyed about a hundred years before this time. This is a promise of salvation not only to the earthly nations of Judah and Israel, but of all nations. And like Jeremiah and the people of his time who heard this promise, we too must look and consider our present condition. Like them, we must realize how devastated we are in our spiritual life. For until we see the bad news of sin and death, God’s words of promise are no good news for us. We too have turned our hearts away from God’s word and law. We too have sinned and offended both God and our neighbor. We too have failed to repent and turn to God for help. And we too deserve death and utter destruction. Yet there is salvation for Israel and Judah and for all peoples.

The next verse describes how the promise will be fulfilled and what it entails: a righteous branch will spring up for David, AND he will execute justice and righteousness. The promise of God indeed tells us how things ought to be in God’s sight. But that is only accomplished by his own doing. The power to overcome our rebellious natures, the power to restrain sin, the power to overcome death is only found in the one who is the life, the way, and the truth. And he is that branch that comes from David, Jesus. The Jews of his time welcomed him as he entered Jerusalem during that Passover week. They did so only because they expected him to render earthly justice and righteousness. One came to him to settle an inheritance dispute, another came seeking advice to get to heaven, others thought he would somehow be king and drive out the Romans. His accomplishing justice and righteousness is not the earthly kind, but the spiritual, the kind that gives eternal life. And he did that in Jerusalem, when he carried the cross to be crucified, to die as a sinner, to die in our place. The righteous for the unrighteous, the just for the unjust, God himself for all people. That is justice and righteousness because sin must be punished, the sinner must die, and God became man so that he could die for us.

But the promise and its fulfillment doesn’t end there. The next verse continues in describing its ongoing effects on the people, on us: people will be saved and dwell securely in “Jerusalem”, AND it will be called “The Lord is our righteousness”. Indeed Jerusalem was destroyed and rebuilt after the appearing of Jesus, but this is not the temporal Jerusalem that God promises, for all things will pass away in this world. But what God promises is something that will never end, something that cannot be destroyed, something everlasting, the heavenly Jerusalem. And perhaps we wonder when this promise will ever come to pass. But notice here that the people who are in it call it “The Lord is our righteousness”. Let me ask you then, don’t we say this here all the time? I can say that I have returned to Canada only because there is a place called Canada and it is here. Likewise, since the righteous branch has come and fulfill all righteousness, everything that I have said is a present reality. Jesus is our righteousness because he has died for all my sins. They are all forgiven in him. We are now living in this reality.

And there is another point that we must not forget. The Lord IS our righteousness, not only in the sense of being saved and justified (that is, called righteous before God for Christ’s sake on the cross), but it also means the Spirit of the Christ is at work in us to enliven us, to live as children of God, so that we exercise righteousness and justice on earth. It is not to balance our sins (as though for 1 sin I do, I should do 1 good in return), and certainly it is not done to get us to God, but that we have been loved and forgiven by God and live in his name, we then also love and forgive one another. The lord is our righteousness, we strive in the confidence that he is there to accomplish this righteousness in and through us.

So we come back to the questions I asked earlier, what is advent for the church and for us? Why are these texts chosen? How do we prepare? It is to constantly look to the future and the present: the future promise of salvation and the present reality that is received by faith. The future promise has already begun when Jesus entered Jerusalem and accomplished that salvation. The future salvation is certain because today the forgiveness of sins is here. So when you go out and see all the Christmas related things, rejoice, though perhaps not with the world or as the world, but rejoice with the whole church because the day has come, the righteous branch of David has come, and he has saved you to bring you to dwell securely in him, even now.