

Waiting in Hope: An Exclusive Christmas? Or a Jeremiah-Jesus Christmas?

Jeremiah 29:1,4-14

December 03, 2017

Ted V. Foote, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

Almost every year as Advent begins, I wonder about one of its major themes, which is waiting. The particular topic of Advent's first Sunday is often "prophecy" and/or "hope." Today we read from the prophet Jeremiah, chapter 29, and we consider what it might mean to be "waiting in hope."

Mercedes-Benz sponsors a 2017 pre-Christmas television ad, in which a boy about 6 years old bounds out of bed on a snowy morning to look outside upon an empty driveway. The next scene portrays supposedly the same boy, now about 11, bounding out of bed on a snowy morning to look outside upon an empty driveway. The third scene portrays supposedly the same boy, now about 16, bounding out of bed on a snowy morning to look outside upon an empty driveway. In the fourth scene, he is about 38 (I guess) because you see about a 14 and 11 year old in the living room of their home. Now a father of two, this guy comes downstairs and looks outside to a snowy driveway on which is parked a 2018 model sedan! His face lights up. The voiceover intones: "Never let go of your dreams. The Mercedes-Benz C-Class is back. Mercedes-Benz: the best or nothing!" – which, I guess, is why, when he was 16, there was no Chevrolet on his driveway.

There's another 2017 pre-Christmas ad, which features a girl about 9, 10, or 11, decorating a straight-up cactus about 5 feet tall with a Fedora hat and scarf, perhaps near Tucson, Arizona – or somewhere in the "high desert." Possibly she decorates the 5 foot cactus because it's the closest thing to a snowman she will have available to her. Scene 2 features the girl in her bedroom, almost tucked under the bed-covers. She shakes up a snowdome containing a small snowman figure, placing it on the bedside table. Scene 3 features the dark of night and her father – accompanied by her mother – picking her up out of bed. Scene 4 shows the daughter asleep in the backseat as Dad and Mom drive through the night. Scene 5 features sunrise, with the girl waking up wide-eyed with surprise, because snow is falling as her family rides along. Scene 6 features their Land Rover vehicle parked in front of a cabin in the mountains, following the family's all-night drive. A snow man has been rolled up and dressed in front of the cabin near the Land Rover. The voiceover intones: "The Land Rover Season of Adventure is happening now. Land Rover: above and beyond!"

Those two commercials may seem a long way from Jerusalem's exiles in Babylon, described in Jeremiah, chapter 29, but I'm not so certain that there's all that much distance or difference between the two ads in 2017 and the recipients of the prophet's letter 580 years before Jesus. Word filtered back to the prophet Jeremiah, who still lived in the homeland of Jerusalem, that the exiles deported by the Babylonians from their homeland expected to return home fairly soon. Like the Mercedes-Benz ad, they were bounding out of bed on a regular basis looking for the dream they'd never let go of: a messenger approaching to inform them that the ruling powers in Babylon were setting them free to return to Jerusalem. And like the elementary-aged girl in the Land Rover ad, they went to bed every night shaking their memory-dream-equivalent of her snowdome, cherishing mind's eye landscapes – not of a snowman, but – of their homeland.

In chapter 29, however, Jeremiah writes to his cousins and former fellow-Jerusalemmites: "Don't plan on being liberated from exile and returning home anytime soon. Settle in there, and live as God's people seeking the welfare – seeking the common good and well-being – of the city where you are, whether – in your fondest dreams – you like it or not!" (In other words, for those living with a percentage of maturity and a sense of reality, you may live your whole life without a Mercedes-Benz in the driveway on Christmas morning, and without a surprise trip to a snow-splendored mountain cabin, transported there in the family Land Rover.) You may live the rest of your days in Babylon, but God's blessing for the common good is still possible and real for you! Can you trust this word from God to be true?" So communicated Jeremiah to his cousins, who lived in forced exile.

Scripture is full of calls and encouragements for God's people to correct, alter, and adjust their perspectives. If you and I take seriously Jesus' summary of the Scripture as to what is most important – "that you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself" – then we can – with greater clarity – comprehend Jeremiah's communication 500 plus years before Jesus: "Seek the well-being of the region where you are, for in its well-being will you find your own well-being." Put another way, "Your good is found among the greater good of all."

Therefore, "waiting in hope" is much more than a fantasy dream; and it is much more than a passive expectation. Waiting in hope during the four Sundays of the Advent season preceding Christmas is more than

looking out the window hoping for a multiple thousand dollar gift in the driveway. Waiting in hope during the four Sundays of the Advent season preceding Christmas is more than living through memories as vivid as the picture-scape underneath a decorative snowdome. This waiting in hope encouraged by Scripture for every day of every year is neither passive nor half-hearted, but engaged. It's not passive or half-hearted, but it is passionate, patient, and participatory. It is also not separated from life, from relationships, from faith-communities, from civic and public engagement, and is not separated from the past, the present, or from the future God desires. Whether in Babylon or Bethlehem, whether in Tucson or Flagstaff, whether in Bryan or Washington, D.C. or New York City – waiting in hope is continually passionate, patient, and participatory seeking the common good, the welfare of all – which is why – every day – we are beckoned by God's Spirit to move from every table where we prefer being isolated and separated from those with whom we are not so comfortable and move to a table of developed reciprocal relationships. At the table of developed reciprocal relationships, we realize soon enough how the table we share with others becomes God's table of reconciliation!

Can't we see the former residents of Jerusalem – hoping for a liberation from captivity soon and maybe easily – instinctively preferring isolation and separation from the Babylonians who dominated their city's population? Yet from their instinctively preferred isolation and separation, God called them to develop reciprocal relationships in their daily lives, in their faith-community life, in their civic life, in their personal and public relationships – right there in Babylon! – because, seeking the common good where they lived, they would be blessed with God's greater good for all! In a manner of speaking, when passionate, patient, and participatory, seeking the common good and the well-being of all, they would move from the “table of isolation and separation” (which they instinctively preferred) to the “table of reciprocity,” which, by God's love, becomes the “table of reconciliation.”

The movie, “The Greatest Game Ever Played” was produced by Walt Disney Corporation in 2005. It tells the story of the 1913 U.S. Open golf tournament, played in Brookline, Massachusetts, which came down to a playoff between the two best British golfers of the era and a lone U.S. golfer, a 20 year old amateur, named Francis Oiumet. In the weeks leading up to the U.S. Open, however, it was not clear at all that Mr. Oiumet would be allowed to play, since the Brookline Golf Club was limited to members with substantial wealth. Francis' father was a machinist with little education who worked long, hard hours. Francis had learn the game of golf “on the side.” When he was 19, he had to give up developing his skill to take a job. A few local golf enthusiasts, though, were aware of his exceptional skill, they advocated for Francis to play in The Open. Many of the “wealth tradition” resented the very thought of allowing him to compete. At a pre-tournament gathering, one of the “wealth tradition group” says to him: “Young man, you may have been invited, but don't get the idea that you belong here.”

What if any of us, claiming to be God's people, say that to anyone else around the table of reciprocity – “You, madam or sir, girl or boy, may have been invited, but don't get the idea that you belong here”? Well, then, won't we have indicated that we prefer the table of separation and isolation? That we prefer and love our own kind and our own ways more than we prefer and love all of God's kinds and ways? And what might have been a table of reciprocity transforming into a table of reconciliation does not develop!

Waiting in hope includes engagement in the community of the region and of the world where and when we live. It's not passive or half-hearted. It's passionate, patient, and participatory. It's nothing less than loving God with all of one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and one's neighbor as oneself (Mt.22:37-39; Mk.12:29-31; Lk.10:27) – seeking the common good and well-being of all of God's people, “because God first loves us” (I John 4:19)! Waiting in hope that way will move us from tables of separation and isolation to the table of reciprocity in relationships, which becomes God's table of reconciliation – to where we have not only been invited, but to where – from God's initiative and invitation – we all belong! Maybe it's not to our way of thinking, but it absolutely is God's way of thinking! From this table and with such hope, we are gifted to celebrate – not an exclusive Christmas of any type, but – a Jeremiah-and-Jesus-Christmas! Hoping and sharing in a Jeremiah-and-Jesus-Christmas will get you and me bounding out of bed and even driving through the night 365 days every year! We seek the well-being of the entire world every day because God continually loves all of God's people, wherever we are and whenever we are there. – All honor and praise be to God.