

Sermon for the 1st Sunday in Advent

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 23:5-8

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’ ⁷ “Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’ ⁸ but ‘As the Lord lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.’ Then they shall dwell in their own land.”

What a time in which the Prophet Jeremiah spoke and wrote about the righteous Branch of David and a gathering of the exiled and scattered people of God in their land. Some of us experienced similar times during the last war.

The difference of time is in fact immense. However, critical times of certain years and days are comparable in world history. The long-lasting consequences of unfortunate wrong decisions made in blindness and conceit are also comparable.

In any case, it was a fateful time in which Jeremiah spoke and wrote about a righteous Branch of David, between the years 597 and 587 B.C. In 597, Jerusalem was already captured by the Babylonians but was left intact, many from the upper class were taken away, the king was captured, Babylonian rule was set up. Most of the people, however, were allowed to stay. And the Jews even got their own king again, the uncle of the deposed and imprisoned king. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, placed this new king as a tributary king and gave him the lovely name, Zedekiah - God's righteousness. And this Zedekiah was like all his predecessors back to Solomon, in blood and origin, a true descendant of David.

But he bore the righteousness of God as little in his heart as most of his predecessors. God's righteousness was also not the guiding principle of his 10-year reign. Rather, the guiding principles were his own thoughts and what he let himself be convinced of by his increasingly adventurous advisors. Jeremiah knew what it all would result in and gave warnings, but all in vain. It resulted in rebellion against the world power of Babylon, termination of the oath of loyalty that Zedekiah had sworn to Nebuchadnezzar, a second siege of Jerusalem worse than the first, this time with fire and destruction, with massacre and terror, and with that, a second deportation, this time the deportation of almost the entire people from their home into a foreign land. 70 years in Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah saw all this coming and prophesied it in shocking words, often over and over again. And he advised them to be quiet and to wait and hope in the name of the Lord. No adventures but being patient and learning to bear the burden until the Lord God lets the new hour come. He is the Lord of History, the Lord of nations and of rulers and will bring about His righteousness. But they ignored Jeremiah's words and thoroughly ruined the people and the land for a long time.

But how then can this Jeremiah, who expects the destruction of Jerusalem in the near future, as well as the destruction of the Davidic kingdom, the great deportation and the long exile, an extensive

catastrophe in which the complete dissolution of Israel with no hope of a future was to be expected – how can Jeremiah still anticipate a future?

How can he anticipate a new righteous Branch of David, a King and Shepherd from David's house, a ruler after God's own heart – and how can he anticipate a new gathering of God's people in their homeland? There was nothing but demolition and ending in sight, blood and tears, debris and foreign things, helplessness and crime. And no one knew this better than Jeremiah, whom the Lord God had called to relentlessly declare all of this.

Jeremiah creates hope not from himself. He also hadn't taken the words of judgment from his own thoughts and heart. He spoke it in the name of the Lord and suffered unspeakably from it. In exactly the same way, the prophet takes the light of hope, not from his own chest – nothing more than misery and despair dwell there – the Lord God alone gives the light of hope to him; even in the midst of anger and His severe judgment, God is nevertheless faithful to all His previous words of life and lets new things come.

That's why Jeremiah, who sees a great time of terror beginning, dares to speak about times of help and salvation: *"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'*

A word from the Lord was once spoken to David by the prophet Nathan that from David's house and lineage, a king should come on whom all of God's good pleasure would rest and God's grace would never depart from him and his kingdom would never end. In Jeremiah's time, a few hundred years after David, the kingdom descended from David was about to be dissolved, the lowest decline in its history, without any political future. Would God's word about the eternal king from David's line now be ended, would the downfall and removal of the kings of Judah share in the hopelessness of sinful people?

No, says the prophet, never! No, says the Lord God Himself through the mouth of the prophet: *"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch."* Jeremiah knows nothing about how and when this will happen. He also can't imagine it. How can one imagine a new life and new blessings when one stands on the edge of a cliff and the ground already slips out from underfoot and you feel it break apart? What is new isn't imaginable as human possibility after catastrophe, rather as deeds and gifts of God alone: *"I will raise up!"* God is faithful to all of His words, He also doesn't cancel the words Nathan spoke to David. He will let the time come when it will be wonderfully fulfilled.

It has come true. The Lord God fulfilled His word, more profoundly, fully, and wonderfully than Jeremiah could have understood. And it was therefore more wonderful and profound because it was not fulfilled in the political route of an earthly kingdom nor was it just for Judah and Israel and a narrowly defined individual country. It was spiritually fulfilled through the King of Truth whose kingdom is not of this world and encompasses the entire world and leads into the eternal kingdom of God; and HE, the righteous Branch of David, Jesus Christ, is the King of Salvation and the good Shepherd for people of all nations and ages, to those who listen to His voice. And everyone who searches for His help will be given His righteousness and through Him as their Savior, can stand before God.

So, the word about the righteous Branch of David that Jeremiah dared to speak about in the darkest hour of horror, is wonderfully fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Politically, however, the descendants of David never became great again. When Israel was allowed to go back to the land of their fathers after 70 years in Babylonian captivity, their land was a province of the great Persian Empire and then under Syrian rule for a long time, and then in the time between the Old and New Testaments, they became independent through the Maccabees but not ruled by kings from David's house. Finally, it became a Roman province and the king, which Rome allowed to rule there, Herod, was not a real Jew nor did he have anything to do with David's family tree.

From Jeremiah to Jesus – almost 600 years and a political history full of change for the people and land of the Jews, not an outwardly great or significant story - and the descendants of David in this story never again at the helm of power - quiet, almost forgotten people. But God knows what He wants; God does what He said. God stands by His word even over the longest periods of time. What people already forgot and had as good as eliminated, God fulfills in His time: *"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch."* It is Jesus Christ, who was born of Mary in Bethlehem, the town of David, who was adopted and cared for by Joseph, a descendant of David.

We may also rightly call Him: *'The Lord is our righteousness.'* By Him, we are helped and we live safely. We helped to find peace with God and in the house and heart of the Father is our permanent and eternal home.

Restless, confusing, and ominous times might come in world history. We really don't want them to come but pray and should also ask for outward peace and the preservation of civic freedom. But do we know what else is in store for us? Now comes what should and must come, on a large scale or also only in the context of our own little life story. We have a King and Lord, a Shepherd and Savior, whose love is stronger than death, whose authority to help saves us through condemnation into life.

The Lord our Righteousness, the Lord our Peace, our Security, the Way and the Bridge through time into eternal life.

The Branch of David, Jesus, has become our righteousness, peace, and life in the most miraculous way. A way that God alone can think of and implement. The Righteous One gave His life for the unrighteous as a guilt offering. And God raised the crucified and buried Jesus from the dead to eternal life and sovereignty. So we have peace with God through the forgiveness of sins and we have hope of life, of the right to live in our eternal Father's house because our King and Shepherd went before us and provides for us. We will come home through Him.

Through Him, we are drawn into the great gathering movement of God's people, which Jeremiah dared to announce shortly before the deportation of the Jews into exile.

God's people will come home again. More glorious and more permanent than Israel was, once they were allowed to return to the land of their fathers from Egypt.

This, too, was later only partially fulfilled outside of the old covenant people of Israel. They returned home. And had to leave again a few hundred years later, after they, in their blindness, had rejected Jesus the Messiah, the righteous Branch of David, their King and LORD. Are they at home today, where they again have the State of Israel and, to a large extent, possess the land of their fathers? Is the Word thus fulfilled? No, apart from the fact that great portions of the world's Jews don't want to live and

reside in Israel. Not a single promise of God is fulfilled for salvation in the ancient covenant people of Israel until they recognize Jesus as their Lord and King and bow before Him.

The day will come because God doesn't give up on or abandon old Israel. But until then, people will be gathered from all nations and languages and brought to the path leading home. Now the path no longer leads to the earthly Jerusalem, it is like Paul once said, "*But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.*" (Gal. 4:26) It isn't the promised land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan Valley, the Sea of Galilee, and the desert of Sinai, as dear as that land is to us because Jesus Christ stayed there and did His work of salvation there. Through Him, a better home is acquired and opened to us: the eternal paradise and fatherland, the new heaven and the new earth, in which lives righteousness.

All the people of Israel and of the nations will go there, those who believe in the righteous Branch of David, Jesus, those who hold onto Him and speak full of Hope: "*The Lord is our righteousness.*" Lord, help us that we may be with You. Amen.