FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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November 28, 2021

*“Making Room” Jeremiah 33:14-16*

*Psalm 25:4-5*

**Happy new year, everyone, a new church year begins today.**

**For those of you who find this a little disorienting, *congratulations!* It is supposed to be!**

**What I mean is that, while so much of the rest of the world welcomes this time of year as the big build-up to holiday parties, shopping, and over-indulging in all sorts of things and ways, it is *not* that for us. In the church, everything starts today—a new year; a new journey with Christ.**

**For a lot of the world, this is a time for looking back. Despite all of the new gifts and gadgets we buy or give each other, Christmas is also the time when we like to look back to “the good old days,” back to the “simpler,” “happier” times. We tell ourselves that life was peaceful and easy—even trouble-free—“back then.” And so, the Christmas season—Advent—is the time of year when feelings of wistful longing and sentimentality is often given free-reign in our thoughts and imaginations.**

**I do not suppose there is too much wrong with such feelings. I suspect it is really nice to remember back when your children were young, and all of them were still at home. It is nice to remember those days when our parents and siblings were still close, and we were all able to gather close to celebrate the way in which God brought us together and made us a family, a church, a community.**

**…The thing is: our Advent journey is never about the past. It is always all about the future. Advent is about preparation for something *new* that God is bringing into the world—and in order for that new thing to come into the world, we are going to have to do something that is often very hard to do. We are going to have to make room for God’s new life to come into us.**

**This past week, I was listening to a recording of a couple of pastors talking about the Bible passages that were read for us this morning, and how the two women are thinking about Advent this year. The pastors were the Rev. Dr. Marcia McFee and the Rev. Grace Imathiu.**

**They began by acknowledging how much of the Book of Jeremiah is filled with gloom and doom, and how Jeremiah can be a real scold. Jeremiah, of course, has been called to prophesy to the Hebrew nation—to Judah and Israel. He was to call them to account for the numerous ways in which they have betrayed God and the covenant God has made with them. Indeed, Jeremiah does not hold back on his anger and condemnation of the people.**

**He likens their relationship with God as one in which they have been like a promiscuous woman, a prostitute without honor or integrity. He calls them on their worship of foreign gods, and the way they have neglected all of the promises they have made to God about caring for all of the people, all of the people. They have failed to practice justice and compassion, especially toward the least among them: the widows and orphans. Their lack of righteousness has had the effect of weakening them as a nation, so much so that they are vulnerable.**

**Indeed, Jeremiah tells them that because of their faithlessness** God is going to deliver the whole nation into the hands of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. Meanwhile, as the inhabitants of Jerusalem desperately attempt to protect themselves from Nebuchadnezzar’s inevitable invasion, the Hebrew leaders become so afraid and angry at what he is saying that they put Jeremiah in prison for telling them the truth.

What was surprising was hearing Rev. Imathiu talk about how she looks forward to hearing Jeremiah’s gloom and doom during the beginning of Advent and the new church year. She says she looks forward to it because it always feels like the real message Jeremiah is bringing to the people is that the *old* story of their life, and especially their *old way of life* is now at a very decisive end—*this is what the people need to hear and act on*.

Rev. Imathiu grew quite excited as she talked about how, if you are going to have a new story, then the old story has got to end—“the old everything and how everything is set up has [got] to go.”

What I believe she meant is that she looks forward to the decisive way in which Jeremiah is calling on the people to “make room” for the new thing God is about to do in their lives. Indeed, the passage we heard this morning is *not* gloom and doom. It is part of the section of Jeremiah’s book known as the Book of Consolation. In a few short chapters in Jeremiah’s very long book, he takes a break from his prophesies of disaster to talk about God’s compassion and God’s righteousness. In the three verses we heard, Jeremiah is able to summarize all that God is: “The Lord is righteousness,” he says [v. 16].

This is the way it is with God, says Jeremiah. God is faithful, and because this is true, the dead end of the people’s rebellion against God becomes the *starting point* for God’s new work. Where the people have torn down, God is already preparing to build up. What they have plucked up, God will certainly cause to grow again…However, you have to be willing to make room for this new growth.

So, there are at least two things we can say about human nature. The first is that we have an affection for nostalgia. The second is that we rarely like change. Actually, these are both the same thing if you think about it: they are both the desire for things to be the way they were in “the good old days.”

I have no doubt that the ancient Hebrews who were conquered and taken into captivity in Babylon longed for their life to return to the way it had been. If not for Jeremiah’s preaching and calling them to account, they most probably would have even pinned for their old ways of idolatry, greed, and their callous, cold-hearted treatment of the vulnerable among them.

For those people who were languishing in captivity, the sights and sounds of destruction still in their sleeping and waking nightmares, it must have felt as though all was lost. For such a people, even if Jeremiah’s admonition was accurate—especially if he had been accurate—then their former life really was over. They had “made their bed” and there was no going back and fixing things. Their actions had separated them from God, and there was no hope for them any more.

The words that we heard this morning must have been quite a surprise—words of comfort, from *Jeremiah!*

Jeremiah, who speaks *kindly* to them, saying God promises that a *new branch* is going to sprout up, even from what looks like an old, dead-stump of a people. Jeremiah says that this is no less than God’s promise to them: that new life is on the horizon—and this new life, this new *hope* is founded on the unchanging nature of God which is righteousness.

Yes, there is hope for the nation, but it will only come if they are willing to leave their old ways behind; if they are willing to make room for the holy to enter in and dwell among them, in their hearts and in their lives. Hope is real and it is possible if they were willing to bring their old life and ways to an end, and begin again with the Lord, who is righteousness.

What I want to say to this church on this first Sunday of Advent is that hope is possible and it is real for us, too—this is God’s word to a people who had been so devastated and despairing, and it is God’s word to us in our own context.

And “yes”, I know that for some time now, our lives have been confused and filled with stress from a variety of directions—the masks we wear are a constant reminder of this. Perhaps our masks could also become a reminder that we have to “make room” for hope which is in God’s new ways of righteousness, and I wonder: can we do it? Can we make room for God and God’s new ways?

I believe we can—because we have in the past in so many ways, but are we willing to do it again? Are we willing to close the door on our longing for *our* old ways and old lives? Are we willing to cross over the threshold of the new door God is opening for us right now?

**[OK, everyone get ready because the next part of the sermon is going to be participatory.]**

Are we willing to grasp the hope we are given and step out in faith with God who is calling us to trust and patience as we continue to work and wait even in this pandemic? If so, we are going to have to leave behind our fear and impatience—can we do that? We have been doing it, but can we continue? If so, let us say so right now, together. *Repeat after me: we can make room for hope.*

How about this: the people in our country, and in many countries all over the world are locked in suspicion, fear, and anger with one another, we eye each other over the culture barriers and suspect each other of all sorts of crimes and corruptions. Are we courageous enough to entertain the notion that the people we disagree with really are people who are a lot like us? More to the point: as we have received God’s grace are we willing to offer that to each other? *If so, say: we can make room for grace.*

NCC, are we ready and willing to start a new year and a new life with God and each other? *If so, say: we are ready…because God has made us ready…because God has given us hope, peace, joy, and love.*

OK, one more time. Repeat after me:

*We can make room for hope.*

*We can make room for grace.*

*We are ready…to go through the door.*

*We are faithful.*

*We are blessed.*

Yes, we are. Happy new year. Amen!