

## “Branching Out”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 21:25-36

It all began with the vision of a tree....

Jeremiah shared God’s vision for the house of Judah: “I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Jeremiah’s vision came nearly 600 years *before* Jesus’ birth, amidst the Babylonian exile, when hope was in short supply as the Hebrew people sat among the ruins of what was once a great and blessed nation, something that now seemed to them only the lifeless stump of what once was.

Since Jeremiah begins our lectionary with this image of branch springing forth from a tree, I thought I would go with that image while living into my sermon. Many of you know my spouse, Chris, and that she has worked her entire career in media. She also loves movies and has since she was a child. One thing you may not know is that much of her bucket list consists of things that happen in the movies. The first time she shared a Christmas dinner with my extended family, she asked, “Where’s the goose?” because in the Christmas movies she had watched growing up, white families apparently ate goose for Christmas dinner. This year there was another movie memory she wanted to experience for herself and also for our family. She wanted to go to a farm and chop down our own Christmas tree. She had visions of us winding our way to a cheerful country farm, where we would find the tree standing tall and proud and we would all just know it was the one. We would enjoy hot cocoa and then go home and eat

homemade dumplings which I had prepped ahead of time, then decorate the tree.

As it turned out, our GPS was possessed by demons and it kept sending us in circles. It took us 20 minutes to leave Bergen Boulevard. We finally made it down those wandering country roads... however, instead of sending us to the tree farm the GPS gave us odd directions like “turn left on “Cemetery Road,” which was a lonely path more than it was a road that meandered through a crumbling graveyard. We turned back a couple of times and finally found the tree farm just before dusk. When we pulled into the parking lot that was a pit of deep, sucking mud, we realized we forgot to put our daughter and her cousin who was with us into their winter boots. But we finally found “our” tree, and even managed to saw it down. It began raining as we netted the tree and tied it to our car, and the children were hungry so we made a reservation at an Irish pub a few miles down the road. When we pulled up to the Irish pub, they told us that despite our reservation there was no room in the inn. They were fully booked with a holiday party. So we backtracked, found the Cemetery Road again, and ended up at a diner. Once we were back on the road again, Kai asked Chris if she still had the necklace Kai had asked her to hold at the Diner. Chris felt her pockets and then felt them again with alarm. She pulled over to the side of the road, but the necklace was not to be found in her pockets, or in the sides of the car, or anywhere else. We turned to go back to the diner when all of the sudden, sirens sounded from the backseat. No, there was no police car on our tail; these were the anguished cries of a 6-year-old who feared her necklace would be lost forever. You should know this was not just any necklace; last summer, Kai had started writing letters to the mermaids, and sticking them into our mailslot. She asked them to come over to our house for playdates. She hoped that the mermaids could swim from the ocean, up the Hudson River, and through the stream that runs through our neighborhood to get to our house. Well, one day Kai actually did get a letter back, signed by a mermaid, and it came with a necklace with a single pearl on it-- the same necklace that was

lost last night on a lonely country road on the borders of New Jersey. Luckily when we pulled back into the parking lot of the diner, we found it, shiny in the streetlamps from the rain. We headed back on the road, and at the end of the night we were all so exhausted we simply left the soggy wet Christmas tree tied to the car's roof while we dragged the children to bed.

It wasn't a perfect night. Not in movie terms, anyway. We may have even argued about whether or not to follow the demon-possessed GPS, causing our daughter to whine, "I hate it when you fight!"

Hopes of perfection often fail us. We just aren't built that way, despite how polished things may look on Instagram, or how put-together we may look when we sit in the pews. The truth is, we are a bunch of broken people living in a broken world. That was obvious to Jeremiah and his audience. In fact, he recognized that some of their political choices had put them in the terrible state in which they were living.

Our lesson from the prophet Jeremiah this morning offers a vision, not of perfection, but of **redemption**-- even though the reality is much muddier than that. Redemption is a word that gets used a lot theologically but rarely gets defined. The Greek word that gets translated as redemption, "apolutrosis," means a loosening, or of release. It starts out as an economic term-- when you have been redeemed, you are released from the burden of your debt. Spiritually, redemption is also a release: a release from oppression, or from fear, or from shame... What it is we need redemption *from* may depend on the audience. What is it for you? What is it for us?

"The days are surely coming,' says the Lord"... and we are led to find hope in those days to come, even in the midst of the murkiness, when we will stand up and lift our heads because we know our redemption is near.

Luke's gospel goes right out and names the fear that was heavy in the air. Like Jeremiah, it envisions a future; but rather than see that future as a sign of hope, Jesus in Luke predicts a future that has signs of fear, rather than those of hope: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." This is not the kind of warm, fuzzy vision you want to lead people with as we begin the first Sunday of Advent on our journey towards Christmas.

But then Jesus told them a parable. Again, we get the vision of a tree... For Jesus, it is a fig tree that stands in for all trees. The sprouting leaves on the tree tell us summer is arriving. This too is a sign, that the kingdom of God is near, and your redemption is drawing near.

Let me tell you about another tree. It was a gift to me, but it was on a sad occasion. My professor and her husband experienced the sad disappointment of being in the adoption process, and, after having met the birth mother, attending the child's birth, holding the newborn infant and naming her, the birth mother decided within the state's required 24-hour waiting period before a birth mother can sign her child over into adoption, that she would keep the child she had birthed. My professor and her husband were quiet for several weeks, and when they emerged they handed out saplings to their closest friends, with a letter attached: "Please take this tiny tree and plant it somewhere you hope it will grow. Do not tell us about where, or whether, you planted it. This is an exercise in trust for us, that there is a community, and an earth, that will help these young trees to take root and grow. We will not be able to be the ones to raise the trees or to know of their welfare. So it is for the child that we held, and named, and loved. We will trust that those who hold her now, and the community around her, and the earth that will help to sustain her, will give her what she needs to grow. We thank you for being a friend who is among our network of people we trust and love, and who love us, during this difficult time."

In the midst of what is fearful and despairing, the choice to trust-- and to ask those close to you to help make that trust real-- is a step towards the restoration of hope. Just as there are a sprinkling of trees planted around Atlanta 19 years ago at the loss of my professor's hoped-for daughter, now standing as tall as a 19-year old girl might stand, there is more hope, and life, and possibility, and redemption growing out there than we could ever be aware of.

Hope for a broken people, in a broken world. The scriptures left for us by our ancestors who grappled to know and love God are good to us in the fact that they understand that our lives are not easy. Just as we see brokenness in our world, the bible tells the stories of the brokenness of our ancestors. It is honest, if sometimes brutal. The coming of the Christ reminds us that our redemption is drawing near. So, stand tall. Make your faces look up. God is branching out into our lives, and into our world. Amen.