

## **“Just In Time”**

Jeremiah 33

Advent I

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11/29/09

### Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson – Jeremiah 33:14-16

The setting of the prophet Jeremiah comes during a time of turmoil and exile for the people of Israel in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC – their nation defeated, the capitol of Jerusalem destroyed, people brought into exile in Babylon. In these circumstances Jeremiah is not shy about proclaiming judgment to the leaders and people – and he is also not hesitant about proclaiming hope. This passage of hope and promise points to a righteous ruler who would restore Israel, and it also became for the Christian community a foreshadowing of the promise of Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

Two words – righteousness and justice – that’s what I’d like to reflect on today – righteousness and justice. Quite church-y, religious sounding sort of words that might make you tune out right away if we’re not careful – I may have lost our youth already! After all, when’s the last time you used righteousness in everyday conversation? Justice is a bit more familiar for us – although I’m not sure what mainly comes to mind with it – perhaps more of a legal term or idea – the justice system – criminal justice – liberty and justice for all – relevant to us at times in particular ways, but maybe not so much day to day. I want to talk about righteousness and justice because that’s what we heard the prophet Jeremiah talk about today – and if we are to hear those words as something relevant and engaging to us, I think it would help to

realize first the ways that they will not be – how they might put us off rather than pull us in.

Righteousness – not an everyday conversation word, but when it does come up, it seems it has somehow taken on more the idea of self-righteousness, of moral snootiness. If you would hear the idea, it could be about describing someone feeling rather self-satisfied and superior about him or herself – ‘well, she’s quite the righteous one, isn’t she?’ – righteousness is something that religious people in particular would present themselves as having a corner on, in contrast to the non-religious; something that Christians would aspire to be – righteous – in order to look down on the unrighteous around us. And it seems to be an individual idea – a righteous person...just a bit aloof – a condescending sense of being a bit better and purer than the rest. You could even say it’s come to be a conservative sort of idea – conservatives focus on righteousness – personal piety – the religious “right”eousness! ☺

Justice – if you take it out of the legal realm, and look at in terms of religious culture – justice has its own particular following. Justice has a focus on addressing social problems and transforming broken structures. If righteousness is for the conservatives, then this is for the liberals – liberals focus on justice – and as they do so liberals can develop their own sense of moral superiority along the way. No need for that personal piety stuff – that’s a bit unenlightened and uptight – it’s not even so important what you believe - there are plenty of big causes of justice to pursue, so everyone get on board the peace train and we’ll be on the left track! ☺

What I’m saying is that somehow righteousness and justice have come to be put in contrast to each other – perhaps even being at odds – or choosing one or the other. But the prophet Jeremiah seems to have no such separation or distinction – Jeremiah proclaims that the promised ‘righteous’ leader will

bring about 'righteousness and justice' ...linked – together – side by side. And so I'd like to give a different spin on those words righteousness and justice that I think can help us to embrace the way Jeremiah brings them together.

Righteousness – I came to understand that idea in a new way listening to a lecture at Princeton Seminary 20 some years ago in my intro to the New Testament class. My professor told a story from his flower-child days in the 60's when he was living communally with a bunch of other students, all without much money, all sharing what little they had. One day he happened to be able to afford to buy some food, and he brought a bag of groceries home to share with his communal housemates - and when he came in carrying the bag, one of his friends said: 'hey man, that's a really **RIGHTEOUS** bag of groceries.' And my seminary professor said, yeah, that's exactly what righteous is, what righteousness is; it is not a disembodied concept of moral superiority, it is the goodness of God reflected in everything – found in the midst of life.

Justice – I came to understand that idea in a new way listening to a lecture a few weeks ago by Dr. Miguel DeLaTorre at the Room for All conference – some of you remember Dr. DeLaTorre from his days at Hope College – a distinguished theologian and writer – and he and his family a part of Hope Church in their time here. In this lecture, Miguel talked actually about the word righteousness – and what he said is that in Spanish, the word righteousness is translated as justice! – that where we would find 'righteousness' in English, it would read 'justice' in Spanish. Now clearly, in Jeremiah, 33:15, there are two different words, righteousness and justice – but what Miguel was saying is that the ideas are not distinct from each other in Spanish, but nearly synonymous. Justice is an expression of

righteousness; righteousness leads to justice – you cannot have one without the other.

It's that bringing together of righteousness and of justice that seems important for us to hear as a word of God for us today – not farming out words and ideas to the conservatives or to the liberals, but a prophetic word that brings together who we are inside and how we act outside; links us as individuals to the communal; connects our beliefs to our actions.

And since I seem to be working in 2s today – I'd like to bring those ideas of righteousness and justice together in two ways. One way is in terms of time: a commentator I read this week noticed that in Jeremiah we hear “in those days” as a way of looking ahead with hope – “in those days” is the promise of the future God will bring, a time when righteousness and justice are expressed fully; but on Christmas Eve we will hear “in those days” looking back – ‘...in those days a decree went out...’ – it is a looking back to the story of Jesus as the story of the promises of God. The power of the Advent season leading us to Christmas is that it teaches us to live in that tension of time which looks both to the past and to the future – never one or the other, not just the good old days, or just the sweet bye and bye – but with the promise of God past and future, we are directed to look and find the Advent, the coming of God, now – because of the past and because of the future, we are attuned to the righteousness and justice of God in our lives and in our world now – the past and future ARE now.

A 2<sup>nd</sup> way – I think the most important way - to bring righteousness and justice together, is to realize that they are not some sort of idea or concept, they are the very character and person of our God – Jeremiah makes this stunning statement: “The LORD IS our righteousness” – which, remember, we can also hear as “The LORD IS our justice” – righteousness is

not a set of moral standards to follow, justice is not a set of causes to promote – righteousness and justice are part of the heart and substance of who God is – which means we find those things not in norms that we establish, but in a relationship with the living God who establishes them in us and through us... which means that righteousness and justice aren't just embodied in a bag of groceries, but in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ – we hold to an enfleshed, incarnated faith – alive in the One who *IS* righteousness and justice – and we come to the table to be nourished in that life for us.

Look back, look forward, look right, look left – and the LORD who is our righteousness and justice will reveal to us a way for right now and right here to be God's people. AMEN.