**“A Righteous Branch”** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, November 28, 2021

**Jeremiah 33:14–16**

14The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 16In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

**Luke 21:5–6, 20, 25–27**

5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down. . .

20 “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. . . .

25 “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. 26People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.”

You may be thinking of the theme of Thanksgiving, and I hope your Thanksgiving was memorable for both family and feast. We have many reasons to be thankful. I want to suggest that one of the things that enables us to be thankful is hope. Our two Bible passages are very much situated in their time and place. Both have something to say about the author’s hope for the future. They can also offer us hope for the present.

We saw a few weeks ago, in our reading of Mark 13, that Mark seems to have mixed together two different speeches of Jesus, one concerning an attack on Jerusalem with a destruction of the temple, the other concerning the return of the Son of Man on the clouds with power. Luke uses Mark as one of his main sources, and he follows Mark in this mingling of two different events. We know that indeed, the temple was overthrown and Jerusalem was attacked by the Romans in 70 a.d., however, we know that the Son of Man has not yet returned.

If we want to build on the Advent theme of hope we probably have to use the Jeremiah passage. It promises the coming of a righteous Davidic ruler. We believe Jesus was that Davidic ruler, but not an earthly king, rather, a heavenly one. “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36 RSV), he said.

We can plumb Jeremiah for signs of hope, which is key to the season of Advent. Jeremiah’s hope for a righteous king who would restore the fortunes of Judah was never fulfilled in a literal way. Rather, he prophesied and witnessed the end of the Jewish kingship. The early Christian hope for the dramatic and imminent return of Jesus, accompanied by upheaval and by people fainting with fear, has also not been fulfilled. But this does not make their hope entirely false. Hope can be true and spiritually motivated even when what is hoped for is wrong as regards the literal factuality of the precise events that are anticipated.

The truth of hope is spiritual. The greatest hope is for a world in which we all accept God as Father and every man and woman as part of God’s family. Hope is one of our emotional and spiritual links to God. The test of hope is in the heartfelt spirituality, not in the factual content of the thing hoped-for. Many Jews had a hope for a new king that would vindicate the Jewish nation and lead them into their destiny. When they linked that hope with Jesus, they made the right spiritual choice, even though it meant they had to revise the *content* of their hope.

Hope is a dynamic, not a static, thing. It is an energizing force within that moves us to act. Hope’s essence remains the same, though the details of the things hoped for change as the world changes. Hope does not mean blind optimism. Hope means the freedom to take action to better one’s life or to better someone else’s life. Even in prison, hope tells one that some action can be taken to better one’s condition. The author Viktor Frankl, who survived Auschwitz, called hope “the last of human freedoms: to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (<https://muldoont.medium.com/facing-our-hardships-with-hope-lessons-from-viktor-frankl-7a44b7bb4990>). Frankl was not naïve or ignorant of the moral evil around him. But he knew that those who had hope could survive that experience, while those who lost hope suffered a loss of meaning and purpose, and rarely survived. Once they became hopeless, they became helpless. Find the *meaning* in your life, Frankl said, and live into it. If you have that meaning, life will unfold with beauty and purpose, even if there is also suffering.

Hope is inseparable from aspiration, the desire to achieve some noble end. Therefore, hope is also inseparable from idealism, the motivation to act spiritually. And hope is inspired by love. As Paul wrote, “hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5). Hope is like a tailored coat that adapts to each person, each purpose, or each need.

Idealism and love are the engines that empower hope. Jeremiah expressed the hope for a ruler who “shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (33:15), and Christians have long hoped to be ready for the day when they “will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27). These are hopes for rectification and justice, for correction and fulfillment. These are highly theological hopes. Some of our hopes may be more down-to-earth and personal, perhaps hope for a new job, hope for gaining the respect of a certain group of people, or hope for a personal relationship.

The structure of such hope is the same, even if the subject matter is different. Like the more theological hopes, these hopes are motivating and energizing. They draw upon our ideals and our desire for love and fairness.

You can pray for God to spiritualize your hopes, to link your down-to-earth hopes with higher, spiritual hopes. The supreme hope is ultimately to be transformed so that you may be like Jesus. As John writes, “when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2–3). This is an even greater hope than the hope for Jesus’ return, since it has to do with our own linkage with God. The desire to be like Jesus is a desire to be loving, noble, pure, in line with God’s will. That is the highest hope. If we are Jesus-like, we will have ethical and satisfying relationships. We can contribute to transformation of the world, each in our own way. But it all begins by being aligned with God’s will. You can’t make the world a better place until you make yourself a better person.

The slaver John Newton had a religious experience when his ship was miraculously saved from sinking, he believed. He later retired from the slave trade, wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” and wrote an anti-slavery pamphlet that contributed to slavery being outlawed in England in 1833. His personal transformation preceded his ability to contribute to social change. Perhaps your transformation may not be so dramatic but it still matters, even if it happens over a course of time.

Transformation requires consistency as well as commitment. If you consistently pray for help, God will work on you. You will be “strengthen[ed] in your inner being with power through his Spirit” (Eph 3:16). Seek for this inner strengthening. Seek for your hope to be ennobled by the Spirit and so honored by God. Then you will be empowered to be a light in the world, capable of serving others. As Paul said, “now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13).

And this experience leads to gratitude. Writer Melody Beattie say s “Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today and creates a vision for tomorrow.” (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/67563-gratitude-unlocks-the-fullness-of-life-it-turns-what-we>).

To summarize, hope gives meaning, and meaning helps us to achieve worthy outcomes in life. Hope also energizes and motivates. The highest hope is to be transformed to be like Jesus, so that we might do the will of God. Such transformation empowers us to do good in the world. Your meaningful and hopeful living is of value to others. Faith, hope, and love work together, and the greatest of these is love. My hope is that each one of you appreciate the loved ones in your lives, experience a joyous Christmas season, and that you have good health.