

## Is Hope on Vacation?

### **Jeremiah 33:14-16**

The 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. In 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. In 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."

### **Sunday, November 29, 2009**

Do you get fooled by Advent? It happens to thousands of people every year. We forget that our Christian time of preparing for Christmas has an entirely different character than our culture's consumeristic preparations. Why do we love Advent? Because of music, and decorations, and special meals, and family traditions. We do not love Advent because of what's happening in Sunday morning worship. Our culture suggests that Advent is a time for warm nostalgia, but the stories we hear in church during this time are anything but warm and fuzzy. Theologian Gary Charles says, "The stories of Advent are dug from the harsh soil of human struggle and the littered landscape of dashed dreams. They are told from the vista where sin still reigns supreme and hope has gone on vacation."

Jeremiah takes us this morning to arguably the worst moment in the history of the Israelites. The people have been violating God's covenant for years, and they have heard the prophecies of destruction. But when the Babylonian Empire comes in and overtakes them, the violence is worse than anyone could have imagined. Thousands of men, women and children are slaughtered. The Temple – the very house of God – lay in ruins. The Israelites who survived gather together trembling, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Because they know how the Babylonians do business. They know that families are going to be torn apart as many are sent to live in exile. There will be no winners here.

When Jeremiah speaks this morning, he is speaking to a people who are at the bottom of a very deep empty. So Jeremiah reminds them of God's promise. God has promised: "In 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. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety."

Great for us! Jesus is the righteous Branch. He came to bring justice and righteousness. We are saved, and thus we live in safety. Well, not so fast. Advent is a tricky time of year. We have to think fourth-dimensionally. Advent messes with our concept of time. We are waiting for Jesus to be born, even though we know he has already been born, and is continually being born in our hearts. And we have to hold these different perspectives on time in tension, giving credibility to each. Want me to repeat that? We are waiting for Jesus to be born, even though we know he has already been born, and is continually being born in our hearts.

With our sense of time and space now completely upended, how do we understand God's promise? Has it already been fulfilled? We may not live with the kind of immediate danger that the Israelites were facing at this time, but we can understand what it's like to wait, anticipate, and trust in a promised future that seems very removed from our current circumstances. And I could give you a million different examples of that. But I'm only going to give you one.

Tuesday is World AIDS Day. AIDS is an enduring reality pointing to injustice and unrighteousness. We know how to entirely prevent this insidious disease, yet according to the United Nations, in 64 key countries, fewer than 40% of young people have basic information about HIV and AIDS.

- Around 40 million people have HIV/AIDS worldwide
- 60% of them live in sub-Saharan Africa
- Five people die of AIDS every minute
- In the same amount of time, nine more people are infected with HIV

AIDS is thought to have killed over half a million Americans – nearly ten times the number killed in the Vietnam war. And the Centers for Disease Control estimates that as many as 20% of those who are HIV positive in our country remain undiagnosed and unaware of their medical status. Now there are bright spots. After decades of increasing mortality, the number of AIDS deaths globally is declining as treatment becomes more widely available. Unfortunately, the cost of these life-saving medications continues to rise dramatically.

In the 1980s, AIDS awareness got a huge boost from Hollywood and American celebrities. It seemed that at every red carpet event, everyone who was anyone wore a red ribbon. But I have to admit, it's been a while since I've seen anyone, famous or otherwise, wearing a red ribbon. And I wonder if it's because we feel safe from AIDS. We know how HIV is transmitted, so we know how to avoid it. Unfortunately, avoiding the disease too often results in avoiding those who suffer from the disease. HIV and AIDS still carry a huge stigma, making it the leprosy of our time. We may live in relative safety from this disease, but God's justice isn't complete until every person has that kind of safety.

So what are we to do? It's easy to hand responsibility over to scientists and doctors, asking them to find a cure. It's easy to demand that individuals should be accountable for avoiding risky behaviors that expose them to infection. But you and I both know, easy doesn't mean right. I'm not asking you to set up a research lab. And I'm not asking you to condone risky behavior. But there are ways that even us gathered here in Waunakee can get involved in sharing God's message of love and justice.

Some of you are aware of the United Methodist Global AIDS Fund. It was established at General Conference in 2004, with the goal of raising \$8 million by 2008. That number represents \$1 for every United Methodist in the United States. In our conference, we set a goal of raising 1

million pennies for the fund. I know this congregation participated, and the conference raised almost 1.2 million pennies. Although we reached our goal, if we were to have raised \$1 per member, our goal should have been 8.7 million pennies. But at least we participated.

Unfortunately, as of 2008, nearly half of the conferences in the US have not contributed anything to the Global AIDS fund. Because we have fallen far short of our \$8 million goal, fund-raising continues.

So how much have we raised? So far, a whopping \$3 million, which is making a difference. More than 155 global AIDS projects have been supported in 33 countries, including the United States. Grants are given to programs around the world, to support a variety of education, prevention, care, and treatment programs with small, targeted grants. And 100 percent of the contributions going to help people. No administrative overhead is deducted. The people who are helped are not faceless or nameless but our sisters and brothers in Christ. Let me tell you about a few.

A grant from the UM Global AIDS Fund helped to provide 10 bicycles to St. Paul's Home-based Caregivers group in Chipata, Zambia. Before, the caregivers had to walk many miles to make home visits. With bicycles, their visits have doubled. "My marriage will now be strong again," says one woman. Before bicycles, she had to spend all day visiting clients and would reach home late and tired. She feels that her bicycle saved her marriage.

The Bombay Regional Conference of the Methodist Church in India has started, through its churches, an education, training, counseling, and income-generating project for HIV/AIDS-affected women in the slums of the Pune area. The women contracted HIV/AIDS from their husbands and were cast out from their homes after their husbands died. The project trains clergy and lay leaders to educate congregations to form support groups and empower the women.

One 35-year-old woman, Vandana Pandit attended a 'Facing AIDS' program that was conducted at the Methodist Church in Chitali. Moved by the service and the program, she witnessed to everyone, saying, 'Now my Lord is my healer. Even though the whole world has put me out, the Lord is taking care of me.' Others then opened their hearts and accepted her in the church. Then Vandana began to contact HIV-positive persons in the villages and prayed with them. She would take them to the hospital for treatment.

Mursan Public Health Center's Dhabha Project in Mursan, India, targets long-distance truck drivers who risk contracting HIV/AIDS from commercial sex workers. The project offers education, counseling, and HIV testing at truck stops. The drivers find it convenient to get tested where they stop for rest. The staff refers those who test positive to the nearest government hospital for counseling and treatment. The project has also produced audiotapes, with music and messages about HIV/AIDS, so that drivers can listen and learn while they drive.

Ramesh came to the Mursan Public Health Center with fever, weakness, a cough, and weight loss that had been increasing for five months. "When I came to the Mursan Center," he explained, "I had been sick for a long time and was taking medicines without any relief. The doctor advised me to get tested, and I found I was HIV-positive. I did not know what that meant, but I was very ill. They sent me to the medical college hospital in Meerut, where I was tested and given medicines. After taking them for 5 to 6 months, my health began to improve and I was feeling very good. Now I am helping others to get treatment and help."

There are many more stories of hope. Stories of how United Methodists are keeping the promise of God's alternative view of the future alive. And you can be part of all of this great ministry, simply by contributing to the United Methodist Global AIDS Fund. And I'm going to

make it easy for you to do that today. As you leave, there is a jar in the narthex. Whatever is contributed in there today will be given directly to the fund.

Stephen Bryant, editor of The Upper Room devotional guide, says, “The HIV & AIDS pandemic is bigger than our human capacity. We must make the very best use of medical research, medicine, social work and education...they all play a part in solving the crisis. However the motivation, depth of compassion and perseverance to care for those infected and affected must come from prayer. Ultimately, we are depending on God for a solution.”

The Israelites under Babylonian control were depending on God for a solution. The AIDS epidemic is depending on God for a solution. We are depending on God for a solution to war, child abuse, cancer, bullying, addictions of all sorts... You name it. We are still a world crying out for a Savior. For a righteous Branch to execute justice and righteousness. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Come into our hearts and lives anew this year. Amen and amen.