

Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Advent C • December 2, 2009
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
The LORD, Our Righteousness

I. The Righteous Branch

The Word of the Lord from Jeremiah 33:16: “And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

¹Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes...

This song was sung, the story told, a hundred years before Jeremiah, from the lips of the prophet Isaiah—a beautiful portrayal of how the Lord had made the people of Israel to be His people, showered them with blessings and promises, and looked for them to yield good fruits of faithfulness and love.

Sadly, the tone of the song quickly changed:

... but it yielded wild grapes. ³And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry! (Isaiah 5:1-7)

When Isaiah sang the song, there was little faithfulness or love to be found. Instead of justice, the people applauded popular wickedness. Instead of seeking righteousness, they cried out against the ways of the Lord. Instead of grapes good for the harvest and festal wine, only wild grapes—bitter and useless, an insult to the One who had labored for the vineyard so much.

Those grapes had soured long ago: a hundred years later, it was the prophet Jeremiah whose teeth were set on edge. Hard as it was to believe, things had only gotten worse. Instead of repentance and restoration, the inhabitants of Judah had opted for further unbelief. The consequences were obvious, visible and terrifying: the king of Babylon and his armies were camped around the city in siege, just as Jeremiah had prophesied. They weren't going away. And for his trouble of speaking the Word of God, Jeremiah found himself imprisoned in the guard's court of the palace, “guest” of a very angry king.

There was no hope left. The vineyard was about to be devoured. The ax was laid at the foot of the tree—even the family tree of David. Of the beautiful vineyard once planted, all that would be left

was a smoldering stump. Judah and Jerusalem were about to be wiped out for their unfaithfulness to God, the city leveled and the temple destroyed.

Ah, but God is always faithful. He had made His promises, and He was bound to keep them. So beyond the dark days of that time, the deliverance He'd promised would come. Through the embattled Jeremiah, the Lord proclaimed, "Behold, the days are coming...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 dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"

"I'll keep My promise," said the Lord; and He would.

A righteous Branch would spring up from the tree of David. From that smoldering stump of the destroyed vineyard, the Lord would raise up a king from David's line to rule forever. He would execute justice—condemn sin. He would execute righteousness—make people holy. This would be the salvation of God's people. And note the name by which He would be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." Not just "The LORD is righteous," but "The LORD is *our* righteousness."

The promised Branch—the coming King—was Jesus, of course. You prepare to celebrate His birth not long from now, when the angels sing, "Unto you is born this day in the city of *David* a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord." That's Him in this day's Gospel lesson, too, riding into Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey, as the crowds cry out their hosannas and "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." All of this is God at work, keeping His promise; though He's a strange sort of king. A manger for a first bed is hardly the norm, and this entrance into Jerusalem isn't exactly up to human expectations for royalty. But Jesus hasn't come to fit man's mold: He's come to accomplish God's will. He rides into Jerusalem to do what Jeremiah prophesied: He is going to execute justice and righteousness so sadly lacking among sinners. But behold how He fulfills this prophecy: He executes justice by bearing the sins of all those who deserve judgment, and then submitting to that judgment Himself. God is just and must judge the sinner: so the Son of God becomes *the* sinner whom God condemns in the place of us all. He comes to execute righteousness, too: for by taking away the sin of people, He makes them holy again. He clothes them in His own righteousness. Thus He is just and the Justifier (Romans 3:26), the one who executes both justice and righteousness by way of His cross. The Life of the World gives life to the dead by dying in their place and clothing them with His salvation. And thus the name fits Him well: His people call Him "The LORD is our righteousness." They are saved and secure in the Lord's mercy forever—not because they are righteous by themselves, but because God is righteous for them.

II. A Five-Word Confession of Faith

A hundred years before Jeremiah, the prophet Isaiah also proclaimed, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" (Isaiah 9:2).

We live in dark days: the season bespeaks it well. If you're prone to a bit of seasonal affective disorder, you're starting to feel the restlessness and sadness that comes with the sun's shorter appearances. But that's hardly the worst of it: we live in the same world of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The Babylonian hordes might not be camped right outside the wall, but you know this to be true: the world opposes the Gospel, and it grows more and more tired of showing respect to God's Law. The worse the

disobedience, also the defiance against God. Such sin will not go unpunished forever. It never does. In history, it never has.

There may be little you can do to alter the course of an entire world hell-bent on destruction, but you have other fish to fry anyway. There's that darkness left inside of you—that old, dead sinful nature that still clings to you, seeking to besiege and destroy your faith.

It's there. You know it, because the Lord has written His Law on your heart, and your conscience makes use of it to curb your sinful inclinations and nag you to repentance. Each one of those sins is trying to weaken your faith, make you blind to the Light, ultimately return you into darkness. You know that already—that's the "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not" of the Law. But darkness carries other sinful threats to lead you to back to darkness, chains and death.

There's the fear that comes with living in dark times. There's the anxiety that comes from looking at a dangerous world and personal struggles. Worry is unavoidable, but there's the danger that worry becomes a god—and it so easily can when it grows so much that you begin to think that the evil is so great that God cannot deliver you from it, that He has grown weak in His faithfulness to you. It is not He who has grown weak, but you who have begun to trust in your own faltering strength and projected that on Him. This is when fear has become a god, when you believe it is more powerful than the Lord. It plunges you into darkness: because if the Lord can't deliver you, nothing can.

There's the restlessness within, too. You know—you hear—that you don't trust in yourself and your works for your righteousness. But that doesn't stop you from acting otherwise, and you're restless because you know your sinfulness enough to know that you're hardly righteous on your own. Your old sinful flesh will use your sincere desire to do well to hurt you: it wants you to believe that righteousness comes by your own deeds, because you know that you can't do it. Thus the restlessness as you confess you're saved by grace, but act as if your works are the key to salvation. Of course, if you quelled your desire to do well, your sinful flesh would use that to point out that you're getting less righteous all the time. You will always be tempted to believe that your works have something to do with your righteousness before God, so you'll likely encounter a feeling of restlessness that implies you're not right with God.

There's an uneasiness of who you could too easily become. You're a good citizen with a good reputation who behaves reasonably well; but you're probably aware of your limitations for being that way. Perhaps it's that you've gotten close to the end of your rope, and you know that a little bit further and you'd snap and be a mess, maybe never fully recover. You know which sins especially beckon to your baser instincts, and how you could in fact become a slave to them. Maybe you've been hurt before, and so you know what it's like to hate and what it did to you inside; and so you're afraid that it could happen all over again, but that you might not emerge back from the darkness next time.

Against all of this anxiety, fear, restlessness and unease, I present to you five words that make all this darkness keep its distance, a brief confession of faith that leaves you clearly alive in the light: "The LORD is our righteousness."

You have no righteousness of your own. You are righteous before the Lord because the Lord is your righteousness: the Lord Jesus Christ has gone to the cross with your sin, suffered and died for it, and now robes you in His own righteousness. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ," says Galatians 3:27. Are you baptized? Then you wear Christ's righteousness. He renews it in

His absolution, in the preaching of His Gospel. He gives you His own righteous body and blood in the Supper, and thus His righteousness is renewed in you. His righteousness is your righteousness.

See, confronted with all the sins of the world, it's absolutely true that you cannot withstand them—though you'll be tempted to believe that it's up to you alone now that God has saved you. You're like the child who's sort of learned to use the soldering iron under parental supervision, and now you think you've got to get the job done before dad gets home from work. Chances are, you'll get burned. This is also true when you believe it's your righteousness versus the darkness of sin.

You're no match for sin. But the Lord is. He's already beaten sin. And the Lord is your righteousness.

So when you are assaulted by fear and worry and say, "I cannot stand up to this," you're likely right. There comes a point where that is a true confession. So where your weakness is exposed, you confess, "I am weak, but the LORD is my righteousness. Where I am fearful, He is fearless because He has already conquered sin and death. He will deliver me from these gods of worry; and in the meantime, while I am still anxious, His righteousness covers me." What great news! Even though these fears would show me I am unrighteous and undeserving of God's love, God declares that I am His righteous child, that He loves me for Jesus' sake.

When you find yourself believing that the Lord won't help you until you clean up your mess and get a hold of yourself, you confess, "The LORD is my righteousness." Jesus came to clean up messy people, for the healthy have no need of a doctor. We spoke about this on Sunday when we looked at today's epistle: Christianity is not about being good enough. Christianity is about being blameless. You're certainly not blameless and sinless on your own, but Jesus is—and He gives His blamelessness to you because He's taken away your sin. Therefore, you don't say, "I'll look to the Lord as soon as I clean myself up." You say, "I'm a mess and I can't make myself clean. But, the LORD is my righteousness. And if He declares me righteous, then I am blameless in His sight."

When you are troubled by the evil you could be and fearful of what you might become, it is also a good time to confess, "The LORD is my righteousness." Apart from Him, all sorts of evil are possible; but you are not apart from Him. He has clothed you in His own righteousness—and His light sends darkness scurrying away. Will you be troubled at times by what you could become—sometimes do become—in a sinful world? Sure. I hope so. But Christ is your righteousness. Confess your sins and trust in Him.

His righteousness is complete, it is certain and it is now. He does not declare, "I might be your righteousness" or "I will be your righteousness some day." He declares to you now that He is your righteousness now. That is why your sinful flesh wars against repentance and confession, because that is where your Savior justifies you, makes you righteous. But against the darkness of this world, you stand in the light: because the LORD is your Light, your salvation and your righteousness...because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen