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Jeremiah 29:4-14

First Message

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COME, THOU LONG-EXPECTED JESUS

SERIES: ADVENT 2013

Our offertory today was “The Great Day (Second Coming)” from the album *Music Inspired by The Story* (2011). *The Story* in question is a book published by Zondervan in 2011.¹ It is a retelling of the whole Bible in story form in 31 chapters. To accompany the book and illustrate the story an album of 18 songs was written. “The Great Day” is the last of these songs. It is about the Second Coming, which brings the sense of an ending to the whole story. We are in the season of Advent during which we both look back to the first Advent and look ahead to the second Advent, so this is an appropriate song for us today. The song begins:

We met pain in a garden where we lived a lie
 We met hope in a manger and a baby’s cry
 Rescued by hands bleeding grace
 Are we ready to see His face?
 On the great day.²

Here we have the whole trajectory of the story: from the garden to the manger to the cross to the second coming. From the beginning through the middle to the end of the story. From pain to hope to fulfillment of that hope in rescue, and on to a vision of the end, which is itself a vision: to see the face of God. All will have to see that face. Will it be a welcome sight or not? To see that face, the beatific vision, is the great prospect set out before us.

The Bible tells a story. Unfortunately this is a secret to many people, who often view the Bible as a random collection of nuggets of truth, wise sayings, and principles for living, to be mined for sound bites, but with no overarching story. Over the years I have seen the delight in many people as they discover that the Bible has an overall storyline. Our window is intended to present you with this truth every Sunday, for the window displays the story in multiple acts. There is a coherence to what God has been doing.

The Story is subtitled, *The Bible as one continuing story of God and his people*. The Bible begins with the triune God in eternal glory; it ends with God and his people in eternal glory, as he extends his glory over his people whom he has incorporated into his family through his beloved Son. I am delighted that for the last couple of years churches around the country have been using *The Story* to learn that the Bible is one continuing story. It is a much needed remedy.

We love stories. We read stories. We watch stories rendered as movies. We view our own lives as stories. We tell our stories and listen to the stories of others. Any story is an interplay of plot and character. Some stories are driven by plot, others by character, but usually a person’s story alternates between the two. At times it can be hard to see the plot of our own lives; at such times our character is being tested and shaped. At other times the plot of our lives moves ahead quickly, often as a result of the character-shaping that has occurred previously. Our personal stories have their ups and downs. Any good story is filled with the positives of hope, anticipation and achievement, but also with the negatives of setbacks, shattered dreams, dashed expectations and disappointments. So it is with our lives.

We all have hopes and dreams. Hope is an essential part of human life. Those without hope wither and die. Hope bears little relationship to circumstances: hope can be present in the bleakest and most difficult times, yet in the easiest circumstances you may find people with no hope. The human body and mind is able to endure great hardship when there is hope. But where there is no hope even the toughest can crumble. Hope implies waiting, but it is hard to wait.

The Church Year also follows a story, the story of Jesus. In an annual cycle it remembers key events in the life of Jesus. For 1500 years churches around the world have followed a rhythm, immersed in the story of Jesus, remembering, commemorating and reliving. The Nativity is followed twelve days later by Epiphany, commemorating both the visit of the wise men and Jesus’ baptism. Lent leads to Palm Sunday and Holy Week, culminating in Good Friday and Easter. Then follow Ascension Day and Pentecost. There in a nutshell we have the beginning and the end of the life of Jesus. But the church year doesn’t begin with the birth of Jesus. It begins further back with Advent, a season of preparation. It is a season of waiting, of anticipation, of expectation and of hope. Themes have been attached to the four Sundays of Advent: hope, peace, joy and love. Though today is the second Sunday of Advent I’m going to reflect on the first theme, that of hope. This hope is of God’s advent in Jesus. Advent means “coming”—God has promised to come to his people. The anticipation of advent has two horizons corresponding to two advents: one in the past, one yet future. Our Lord has come once and will come again. Both advents are the object of anticipation. Both advents are remembered at Advent.

The Old Testament prophets contain many promises that God would come to his people. There are many passages that I might have chosen to illustrate these promises. Some of these passages are regularly read at Advent; some of them are included on your sheet of Advent readings. But today I have chosen a passage that is not regularly used at this season: Jeremiah 29:4-14. I selected this passage because of verse 11:

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jer 29:11 ESV)

This is one of the most-used verses in the Bible. You may not have known where this verse is located, buried deep in Jeremiah. You may know nothing about its context. But you have surely heard it and seen it. In the gift section of any Christian book store you can find it printed on posters, on cards, on mugs, on knickknacks and trinkets. At graduation time it is used on cards and picture frames, all to assure the new graduates that God has a plan for them. The implication is that God will unfold their future before them, rolling out the red carpet: they will get a job, get married, have kids, buy a house, the kids will go to the right schools, and so on. All this will unfold under God’s blessing because he has plans to give a future and a hope. Many of us have sought or found, have given or been given,

comfort and hope in this verse. But is it overused? Misused? How many graduating students have found their hopes dashed and wonder whether God does have favorable plans for them? How many have struggled with finding a job or a marriage partner, or with having children. Life doesn't always work out the way that we think God ought to work it out for us. Two weeks ago five of us were in Turkey for a conference of recent graduates from throughout the Middle East. I very much doubt that any of them received a card or picture frame with Jeremiah 29:11 on it. That would trivialize the great hardships and uncertainties that these young people face.

Hope is a powerful sustainer, but it can also be dangerous. Unfulfilled hopes and unmet expectations leave shattered dreams and disillusion. Furthermore, the hopes of one person or group may collide with the hopes of another. In any sports fixture both sides hope to win, and both sides may pray to God to give victory. To which side should God listen? To which side should he give the victory? During the Civil War, to those who inquired if God was on the Union's side, Abraham Lincoln responded, "My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side."

Hopes collide in the Middle East. The national anthem of Israel is *Hatikvah*, meaning "the Hope." This was earlier a Zionist anthem expressing the longing of the Jewish soul to return to the land:

As long as in the heart, within,
A Jewish soul still yearns,
And onward, towards the ends of the east,
An eye still gazes toward Zion.

Our hope is not yet lost,
The hope of two thousand years,
To be a free people in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

But 20% of Israeli citizens are non-Jews. At the conference two weeks ago there were twelve Palestinian Christians from the West Bank and one from Israel proper. Their hopes are dashed by the fulfillment of Jewish hopes.

The prophet Jeremiah was well-acquainted with the lure of false hopes. Though the Bible is indeed the story of God and his people, it has often been a rocky relationship. Jeremiah was God's messenger to his people in a particularly tough time, in the closing years of the kingdom of Judah. Never had the relationship between God and his people been so bad. Though he was God's prophet, his official spokesman, he had a hard time getting the people's attention. The religious and political leadership refused to heed his message of impending judgment. To them it was inconceivable that God would bring calamity on his own people. They continued to hope that life would carry on as always. Their empty hopes were based on the pronouncements of the false prophets, despite Jeremiah's repeated warnings not to listen to such prophets. Time and again Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed the Lord's word to his people; time and again they refused to listen.

In chapters 26–29 Jeremiah opposes the false hopes of the leadership and people. In chapter 26 he warned against their hope in the presence of the temple, confident of their safety because surely God would never allow the temple and the city to be destroyed. But Jeremiah warned that the Lord was quite willing to have that happen, to destroy both temple and city. In response all the leadership and people wanted to kill Jeremiah. In chapter 27, after Nebuchadnezzar had taken many of the leading citizens captive to Babylon, including the king, Jeremiah urged Judah to submit to Babylon. But Hananiah,

one of the false prophets, proclaimed in the Lord's name that within two years the Lord would break the power of Babylon and bring the exiles home (ch. 28). These contradictory pronouncements of the true and false prophets are the setting for our text in chapter 29.

Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles in Babylon:

These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. (Jer 29:1)

In this letter (29:4-23) he gave them the Lord's advice on how to respond to the calamity that had befallen them. Firstly they were to settle down in Babylon:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (29:5-7)

Verse 5 is sometimes taken as justification for urban church planting today: God wants us to live in cities. But this verse was not written for urban church planters today. It was written to Israel in exile 2600 years ago. It was not what the people wanted to hear. And it was not what the false prophets had been saying; Hananiah had told them they would be home in just a couple of years. But the Lord tells them through Jeremiah to settle down in Babylon because they were going to be there for a while—for a long while.

Secondly, Jeremiah told the people to disregard the false promises of their prophets such as Hananiah:

Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord. (29:8-9)

Thirdly, Jeremiah gave some good news:

When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (29:10-14)

God promised that after seventy years he would visit his people and fulfill his promise. This seems like good news, but to the recipients of the letter this was not such good news. God would visit his people not in the two years promised by Hananiah but in seventy years. By then all the recipients of Jeremiah's letter would be dead. There was no good news for them individually. None of them would be coming home. So the message of verse 11 was not an immediate comfort to its hearers. God had plans for his people, but not yet. God had a future and a hope for his people but it was not the future and hope that they wanted or that their own prophets were proclaiming. It was not a future and a hope for them individually but for them corporately as the people of God.

Seventy years later God did bring his people home, or, rather, he brought some of his people home. After Cyrus defeated Babylon he issued a decree allowing the people to return home. One version of this decree is preserved on the Cyrus Cylinder, which has just finished its tour of the US; it was here in San Francisco this summer. But only a few returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel; most stayed in Babylon. Eighty years later some more returned under Ezra and then Nehemiah. For centuries the Jews were scattered in the diaspora, awaiting a full return. They looked for God to visit them.

If you've been following the calendar of Advent readings this past week you would have read some of these expressions of longing and anticipation. For example, Isaiah 64:

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down...

**From of old no one has heard
or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides you,
who acts for those who wait for him. (Isa 64:1, 4)**

And so the people waited. They waited a long time. They waited in different ways. By the end of the first century BC, Judaism had developed in multiple directions. Some had given up waiting and took advantage of present circumstances to advantage themselves; these included the Sadducees who accumulated power and wealth. Among them were the top religious leadership. Others adopted a strict code of conduct to prepare themselves as a holy people ready for God to come. These were the Pharisees who understood that God had failed to come because the people were not yet ready. A third group viewed the whole system as so corrupt and compromised that they went off into the desert to wait in holy isolation. These were the Essenes. A fourth group took matters into their own hands, launching attacks against the Romans to give God a helping hand. This group would develop into the Zealots. The great majority of people didn't have the luxury of waiting in any of these ways; they were simply trying to survive amid the economic, social and political oppression of the Jewish and Roman leadership. These were the people of the land, the farmers, fishermen, tradesmen and artisans who never knew if they would have enough to eat, who had no time to hope for a better future. And finally there were a few people who had a genuine hunger for the Lord, who were waiting with the intensity of the psalmist: "more than watchmen for the morning" (Ps 130:6).

We encounter a few of these people in the early chapters of Luke. Luke has shaped his infancy narrative of Jesus around five faithful people. These were not important people; they didn't figure in the circles of power. But they were faithful people who hoped in the Lord and waited for him with anticipation. Luke starts with an old couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who "were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (1:6). Nevertheless, life had not gone as they would have hoped. Despite their faithfulness to God, "they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years" (1:7). Zechariah was given the great honor of having his prayer heard by God, even as God promised in Jeremiah's letter.

In the middle, and at the other end of the age spectrum, is the young girl Mary, who responds to the angel's annunciation in humble submission, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (1:38). As a maidservant her role was to wait on the Lord.

At the end, both of the narrative and of the age spectrum, are the aged pair Simeon and Anna. Both had been waiting expectantly for

God to do something. Simeon was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (2:25). Through the enabling of the Holy Spirit he saw that the baby Jesus was the answer to his waiting, and that his faithful vigil was ended. In response Anna spoke of Jesus to "all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38), implying that she too was part of that number.

These godly people were waiting for God to come down and visit his people. They were hungry for God, God-focused, and receptive to whatever he would do. In the birth of the two boys, John and Jesus, they recognized that God had indeed come to visit his people. The birth of two babies may not have been what they were expecting, but God's Spirit opened their ears to hear, their eyes to see, and their hearts to understand that he had come to his people with salvation.

The waiting was over. God has come to his people, visiting them with a son. But in what way is Jesus the fulfillment of our hopes, longings and expectations? Too often we jump from the birth of Jesus to his death and resurrection. He came to die for our sins so that we might be forgiven, and thus have our ticket to heaven:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

So we have our eternal destiny assured, eternal life beyond this world. This means that we are still waiting, this time for Jesus to take us from this world to himself, either by death or by a rapture. In the meantime, while we wait for that, what are we to do here on earth? Unfortunately this leads many to think that we carry on with our lives, while looking to God simply to bless our plans until we hand in our ticket to the future. And so we invoke Jeremiah 29:11, "I know the plans I have for you..." We have hopes and longings which we expect God to fulfill.

We know that we fit into God's big plan, to join him in heaven some day. But meanwhile we tend to co-opt him into our plans, rather than the other way, seeing how we fit into God's great plan not just in eternity but here and now. Simeon was looking for the consolation of Israel, Anna was looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Later we read of Joseph of Arimathea who was "looking for the kingdom of God" (Luke 23:51). They were looking for God to intervene tangibly in this world. This is what God has done through his Son, in his birth, death, resurrection and ascension, and what he continues to do through his risen, exalted and enthroned Son.

Our mistake is to bring God into our story, rather than seeing how we are brought into God's story. When we bring him into our story we make him the God of our cause; we treat him as a genie in a bottle, summoning him to bless all our hopes and expectations. But we set ourselves up for disappointment. God is not beholden to us. It is not his role to align himself with us. Instead, he calls us to align ourselves with him, to see how we fit into his story of what he is doing in this world. He has intervened tangibly in the world, establishing his kingdom, over which Christ even now reigns as King. He continues to intervene tangibly as he extends his rule through us.

Earlier we sang "Hark! the glad sound!" written by Philip Doddridge, a pastor in the early eighteenth century. He wrote his hymns to be sung after his sermons to drive home the message. This hymn he wrote to follow an Advent sermon on Luke 4:18-19, where Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue reads Isaiah 61:1-2 as an announcement of his mission. So Doddridge wrote,

Hark! the glad sound! the Savior comes,
The Savior promised long...

He comes the prisoners to release...
He comes, the broken heart to bind...

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
Thy welcome shall proclaim...

Jesus came to make the deaf hear, the blind see, and dull hearts understand. Through Christ and his Spirit, God is still at work doing that, setting the captives free. It is our great privilege to be caught up into this great story of what he is doing. We live in God's story between the two advents. We live in the age of the church in which God is reaching into every corner of the world. Though the first advent is past, we still live in anticipation: anticipation of what God is doing now, and anticipation of the return of the King.

The coming of Jesus is a major theme of Revelation, bracketing the book. In the prologue John exclaims:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him... Even so. Amen. (Rev 1:7)

At the end of the book,

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20)

Ten times in the book, Jesus says, "I am coming." We await the return of the King, his parousia. Not his return to remove us from the world, but his return to bring the kingdom fully to earth. As we wait, we say, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus."

For the prayer book, Thomas Cranmer wrote this collect for the Second Sunday of Advent:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Cranmer wanted us to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the Scriptures. Advent is a good time to reflect on our place in God's story, between the two Advents. Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.

1. *The Story: The Bible as one continuing story of God and his people* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

2. Nichole Nordeman & Bernie Herms, "The Great Day (Second Coming)," *Music Inspired by The Story* (EMI Christian Music Group, 2011), track 2:7.

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