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Advent 1: Psalm 25; Jeremiah 33:14-16
“Happy New Year!”

Today we officially begin our journey through Advent. During this liturgical season of the church we ponder once again the great mystery of the incarnation when God came near to us in the form of a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. At the same time we also remember our calling to expectantly wait for the return of Jesus. Throughout this particular Advent season we will be joining other Mennonite congregations throughout the US and Canada in dwelling with the theme: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

This theme originates from our passage today in Jeremiah 33 which ends with the phrase “The Lord is our righteousness.” “Righteousness is a word used regularly through the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, and often in reference to God.”ⁱ Well, what is righteousness? I feel like it is a lovely theological word that we can throw around and at the end of the day leave still wondering what it really means! Well, we could describe it as “Righteousness is a characteristic of God, which God gives to us and, in the case of (scripture) passages such as Jeremiah 33, (righteousness) is for us. But what does righteousness mean? Righteousness is essentially an ethical term that refers to the rightness of something or someone. When we say that God is our righteousness, we mean that God is the ultimate example of what good looks and acts like.”ⁱⁱ

Today then we begin our journey through Advent. I should also be saying to you, “Happy New Year!” Today, the first Sunday of Advent is also the beginning of the new Christian year. So as the secular calendar is just winding down, today we begin the new calendar of our Christian year. And as one scholar commented this week, recognizing this as our Christian New

Year helps to remind us “that to be a Christian means to never mold (ourselves) to the rules and principalities of this world. It also reminds (us) that with every closing, there is a new beginning. So, on this December day, we begin the story of our faith again anew.”ⁱⁱⁱ Happy New Year!

Recognizing that today is the start of our new Christian year also alludes to the reality that this season of Advent is a season for feeling dissonance with the culture around us. Anne Stewart of Princeton Theological Seminary appropriately describes it this way: Advent

Is a period of waiting in the darkness. It is a season in which we are caught between joyful expectation and the harsh realities of the present condition while we wait for the promise to be fulfilled. And the discipline of this season puts the church at odds with contemporary American culture, in which the holiday season consists of bright lights and celebrations and packages tied with neat bows. There is no room for darkness and little patience for prayerful expectation when holiday carols blare from every speaker and the neighborhood is glowing with displays of lights. Yet ironically, this experience of being out of sync with our surroundings may attune us more deeply to the nature of Advent. In Advent, we live in the unsettling tension between what is and what will be.^{iv}

So today we begin a new Christian year. We turn our calendar page. We pause to reflect on what has been, and we look forward to what will be. We are reminded again that our citizenship is in heaven, and that our God is an awesome God. And during this season of Advent we join other believers as we live in the unsettling tension between what is and what will be.

The prophet Jeremiah address an entire community who is living and breathing this tension. Turn with me to our first passage of Jeremiah chapter 33. We hear these words and are filled with hope and perhaps even excitement. They promise a future, God’s fulfillment, a new leader who will be just and right, salvation for the land and its people, and all brought about by one called “The Lord Our Righteous Savior.” However, placing this text back in its original context we are reminded that the Babylonian siege is underway. God’s people have turned their

back on God. They have placed an idol in the temple. They are making sacrifices for the pagan gods of Baal and Molech. They have forgotten their first love. They have forgotten their Creator.

Prior to our passage Jeremiah warns God's people that destruction and devastation are coming. It has been bad, but Jeremiah shares the vision that it is going to get a whole lot worse. Then Jeremiah shifts the message and speaks God's words of promise and future deliverance. Not only does Jeremiah share this message, but he takes it to heart and actually believes it! In the previous chapter, chapter 32, we read of Jeremiah purchasing land. Now at face value this might not seem like a huge deal. However, again, remember the context. Doom and gloom are coming. The city is under siege. One could easily say that purchasing land at this time is "a foolish thing to do in a country soon to be conquered by invading armies. Nevertheless, (Jeremiah) has purchased the land as a pledge... of God's (promised) redemption... In the midst of impending doom, a sign of hope is enacted."^v

Now, our current context here in Goshen, while not ideal or perfect, is not as dire as Jeremiah's. However, every Sunday we too engage in a sign of hope that is enacted as we light the peace lamp and pray for God's peace. We add another sign of hope enacted during the season of Advent as we light the Advent Candles and pray for God's hope, peace, joy, and love. A small act of lighting a candle gives physical witness to our underlying belief that God will in fact be faithful to God's promises, even the ones that the prophet Jeremiah shared so many years ago. In this way we are "inheritors of Jeremiah's task. We are called to speak a word of hope and promise in a world often filled with fear and uncertainty, even despair. Especially in this season of Advent, we speak words of hope. In the midst of darkness, light is about to break in. In the midst of despair, hope erupts. After long waiting, a branch will sprout. The complete fulfillment

of God's promises has not yet happened, but it is coming. Such is Advent faith, and Advent hope.”^{vi}

Jeremiah’s message assures us on this New Year celebration that a “righteous branch will spring forth and execute justice and righteousness.”^{vii} And then we turn to Psalm 25. On this New Year celebration the psalm “speaks to God on behalf of one believer and provides a posture of receptiveness for the coming days.”^{viii} Turn with me now to Psalm 25.

This psalm is categorized as an individual lament. However, that label is deceiving as it appears two different prayers have been combined to form this one psalm. One prayer is written from an individual crying out to God for help, forgiveness, teaching, and presence. The other prayer is that of a community expressing their trust in God’s deliverance and direction.^{ix} Furthermore, the psalm goes back and forth between these two voices. The other interesting thing to note, which does not come through in our English translation, is that this psalm is an acrostic arrangement, meaning that each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The themes found within this Psalm make it very relevant on this first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of our New Christian year. Interesting to note, this psalm is also the designated psalm for a Sunday in ordinary time, as well as on the first Sunday of Lent. The multiple uses of this psalm denotes its theological significance as well as broad application for followers of Jesus,^x and the words remind us of the message from the prophet Jeremiah.

The psalm begins with a declaration of faith. “In you, Lord my God, I put my trust. I trust in you.” In this season of Advent, where are you putting your trust? In this season of political heightened anger and hostility, where are you putting your trust? In this time of floods, fires, tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes, where are you putting your trust? In this time of broken relationships, broken promise, broken spirits, broken hearts, where are you putting your trust? As

we celebrate the year that has ended, and expectantly enter this New Year, where are you putting your trust? I found that to be a difficult question this week. Where am I putting my trust? Or stated differently, in what or in whom do I find my security? The psalmist says today “In you, Lord my God, the one who is righteousness and teaches us how to live rightly and justly, in you I put my trust.”

The individual prayer continues as the author stops and turns to face their past and recall the ways God has been faithful. This turning back also involves naming the ways God’s forgiveness has been experienced and received. The goal is not to condemn yourself yet again for the ways you missed the mark, but instead to see, name, and celebrate God’s faithful activity in your life. So as *you* think about your past year, how has God been at work in your life? When did you experience walking closely with God? How did you embrace God’s healing forgiveness? When did you experience darkness and who enacted hope for you by bringing a light into your world? What is something the Holy Spirit helped you learn this past year? If you were to give a name to the past year, what name would you give it? How did your experiences of the past year affect the world in which you live? Where did you observe God’s righteousness?

After spending time reflecting on the past the psalmist turns and faces their future, like we are today facing our New Year, and they asks God to be the guide. It becomes both an exercise in discerning who you are already are, and who it is God wants you to become. The psalmist asks to be shown God’s ways, to be taught God’s path. It is a spiritual practice of pausing to reflect, offer gratitude for God’s blessings and then turning to ask for God’s blessing and guiding for the future.

What is your prayer for this New Year and this Advent season? I encourage us, as followers of Jesus Christ preparing to celebrate the incarnation, to continue to live counter

cultural. Therefore let us begin our year end reflections now, as well as beginning to set our new year's resolutions today. However, may our reflections and resolutions continue to faithfully set us apart from the culture that surrounds us. Instead of being individually focused how might God be calling us to be other focused in the coming year? What is God wanting to teach us? How are we inviting God to be our guide? Where are putting our trust? Of what are we most afraid as we enter the New Year? "How is our relationship with God as (we) pause on the threshold of the New Year's vast landscape? What is at the heart of our New Year's prayer?"^{xi}

Today on this first Sunday of Advent, on this Sunday of the New Year, we are caught between the joyful expectation and the harsh realities of life while we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled. In this season of joyful anticipation we also stand with those who are hurting, abused, violated, grieving, and despairing. Today we join God's followers as we live in the unsettling tension between what is and what will be. And like Jeremiah we proclaim a message of hope to all. We boldly share a message of hope that God has been faithful, and that God is not giving up on the promises God has made for God's vast and bountiful creation. And like the psalmist we remember and name what we have learned in the past year and we ask our God of righteousness to be our guide and our teacher as we cross the threshold into a New Year.

I close this morning by extending a challenge to each one of us. The challenge is for each of us to find an hour this week to invite the Holy Spirit to guide us in reflecting on the past year. And then to have time to pray our way across the threshold to the New Year with God as our guide. Perhaps during this time you will choose to pray Psalm 25, or to sing again the songs from this morning – "Lead me, guide me, along the way for it you lead me I cannot stray."

This morning I close the sermon with a prayer for us as we anticipate our prayerful reflection this week. The prayer I will offer is written by Joyce Rupp for this special occasion of standing at the gates of the New Year. Please join me in prayer:

(Gracious God, we come to you.)
Sacred mystery,
Waiting on the threshold
Of this new year,
You open the gates
And beckon to us: (saying)

“Come! Come!
Be not wary of what awaits you
As you enter the unknown terrain,
Be not doubtful of your ability
To grow from its joys and sorrows.

For I am with you.
I will be your Guide.
I will be your Protector.
You will never be alone.”

(So, dear)
Guardian of this new year,
We set aside our fears, worries, concerns.
We open our lives to mystery, to beauty,
To hospitality, to questions,
To the endless opportunity
Of discovering you in our relationships,
And to all the silent wisps of wonder
That will draw us to your heart.

(We wait with hope in this season of Advent.
We pray, Come.
Come and set your people free.
Come.
Come and be near.
Come, draw us to your heart.)

We welcome your unfailing Presence
And walk with hope into this new year.^{xiii}

(In the name of the one for whom we wait, Amen.)

ⁱ *Leader* (Menno Media), 39.

ⁱⁱ *Leader*, 39.

ⁱⁱⁱ Beth Tanner, “Commentary Psalm 25:1-10,”

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3905

^{iv} Anne Stewart, “Commentary Jeremiah 33:14-16,”

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2693

^v Kathryn Schifferdecker, “Commentary Jeremiah 33:14-16,”

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=448

^{vi} Schifferdecker, “Commentary,” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=448

^{vii} Tanner, “Commentary,” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3905

^{viii} Tanner, “Commentary,” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3905

^{ix} Elizabeth Webb, “Commentary Psalm 25:1-10,”

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1513

^x Jerome Creach, “Commentary Psalm 25:1-10,”

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=449

^{xi} Joyce Rupp, *Out of the Ordinary: Prayers, Poems, and Reflections for Every Season* (Ave Marie Press: Notre Dame, Indiana), 146.

^{xii} Rupp, *Out of the Ordinary*, 145.