

First Sunday in Advent

THE LORD IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jeremiah 33:14-16

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

3314The 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.'

Exegetical and theological note: First of all, the text cannot be understood without examining, at the least, the context of chapters 32 and 33. Concerning the immediate passage at hand, the consensus of biblical scholars is that this particular passage is a late addition to Jeremiah for two reasons: First, it does not appear in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture that was completed in stages in Alexandria between the third to first centuries b.c.e. Second, it adapts the messianic promise (or prophecy) given in Jeremiah 23:5-6 to fit the geographical situation that exists 100 years later when the exiles returned from Babylon. Presumably, the scribe thought that the return of the exiles to the land was the fulfillment of the prophecy or promise in Jeremiah 23. However, its fulfillment did not match exactly with the prophet's words. Only the territory of Judea and Jerusalem were included in the post-exilic repopulation of the land, not the region of Israel, the

northern kingdom. The passage, therefore, the argument goes, is an example of how the scribe assumes that the fulfillment of a prophecy informs the meaning of the prophecy and so was comfortable with adapting the literal words of the prophecy to fit its fulfillment. (See Ralph Klein's commentary on this passage: <http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/advent.htm#Advent1>)

For the sake of Christian proclamation (seeing Christ as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy and being informed by the New Testament's insistence on distinguishing God's law from God's promise) we will see the prophecy or promise of Jeremiah as being fulfilled not in the return of the Babylonian exiles, but in the Event of Jesus Christ. Fulfillment of the event as described in Jeremiah is not to be found, ultimately, by focusing literally on the loss and gain of the physical land. Rather, the focus should be on the prevailing reality of "the wrath of God" (Jer. 33:5), which is the "ultimate" reason for this exilic event and for all manner of exile (Step 3 in the Crossings matrix). Accordingly, the promise of deliverance from that wrath is fulfilled by the way God will "forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against [God]" (Jer. 33:8). The fulfillment, ultimately, of that promise is the coming of Jesus Christ, "the righteous branch" (Step 4 of the Crossings matrix). Indeed, the apocalyptic motif in the Gospel for this First Sunday of Advent (Luke 21:25-36) wisely steers us to this kind of theological focus.

DIAGNOSIS: Insufficient Righteousness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Dangerous Days*

The situation of Judah is dire. The glory of the nation and the security in which it once resided is slipping away. It is only a

matter of time until the nation is overtaken by the Babylonians and carried away into exile. Specifically, Nebuchadnezzar's army is advancing on Jerusalem (Jer. 33:5) and the prophet Jeremiah has been preaching that this is God's judgment upon Judah and its king, Zedekiah (whose name in Hebrew means "the righteous") for their cleverly concealed wickedness (33:5). In effect, Jeremiah the prophet is Zedekiah's "Jeremiah Wright" (recall the 2008 presidential elections), speaking words of "God's wrath" (God damning the nation) against the king and the nation for its "wickedness" (33:5).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Shutting up the Word of God: "The Prophet Jeremiah was confined [by Zedekiah] in the court of the guard" (32:2-3)*

What do Zedekiah and the nation do in the face of such danger? They trust in their own righteousness and attempt to silence the word of judgment by locking Jeremiah in the palace prison (33:1). "How dare Jeremiah speak against God's favorite, Judah, and its righteous king, Zedekiah?" After all, isn't Zedekiah a "righteous branch" of the tree of David, a leader with the right pedigree, the right royal genes? At least, that is the skewed logic of all those who operate with a presumption of righteousness before the Lord.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *I Have Hidden My Face (33:5)*

But Jeremiah is only the messenger. He is not himself the rod of God's wrath "executing justice and righteousness" against Zedekiah and the nation. Babylon is (32:3)! And Zedekiah and the nation are helpless before Babylon. Why? Not because Babylon is so powerful militarily (recall how little David felled Goliath), or because Babylon is righteous before God. Indeed, Babylon is as presumptuous before God as Judah and Zechariah—and it too will fall one day. No, the reason why Babylon at this time is invincible is because the Lord says, "I am going to give this

city into the hand of the King of Babylon" (32:3). Babylon is simply a tool in the hand of the Lord "to exercise justice and righteousness" in accord with God's wrath. Just because God's face is hidden within the armies of Babylon (33:5), don't think God's judgment, "the execution of justice and righteousness" upon wickedness, isn't there and real. Zedekiah and Judah do not have sufficient righteous to stand up to this enemy, "the Lord who made the earth" (33:1). Indeed, no one does.

PROGNOSIS: Sufficient Righteousness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *I Will Cause a Righteous Branch to Spring up for David (v. 15)*

If only Zedekiah and Judah had ears to hear Jeremiah, they would hear not only words of judgment but also words of promise. Indeed, the text for today is that promise. Read it now in its entirety! The first thing to note is that "the days [that] are surely coming" have come! They have come in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The old adage holds true. It takes the fulfillment of a prophecy to fully understand the meaning of a prophecy. Who is Jesus Christ? He is that "righteous branch" that "the God who made the earth" himself has caused "to spring up for David" (v. 15). Note, not from David, but for David. David and his posterity do not have sufficient righteousness to prevail against the wrath of God, so thoroughly are they enmeshed in their own "wickedness." But Jesus Christ does! By taking on human flesh and by going to the cross, Jesus Christ enters into our misery and identifies completely with our condition, becoming subject to the very wrath of God that we ourselves are subject to. But because he is, in himself, the righteous Son of God, and in no way deserving of such wrath and death, he has the right, confirmed in the fact that God raised him from the dead, to take the rod of God's wrath out of God's hand, laying it down forever. In Christ a new kind of "execution of justice and righteousness" emerges, a righteousness that is

characterized by these words: “I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me” (33:8). The Lord [Jesus] is the “righteous branch” (v. 16) as the prophet Jeremiah prophesied. He is able to take the sting of God’s wrath out of the hands of all our enemies, establishing himself as the source of salvation and safety (v. 16) before God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Embracing the Promise of God: “The Lord is our righteousness” (v. 16)*

Of course, the good news is not simply that Jesus is righteous in himself and hence, not subject to the wrath of God. Even more, the good news is that he is our righteousness. How so? By faith! Not by trying to shut-up the word and its medium in some prison, but by embracing the promise (and the medium) with thanksgiving (33:11). Just as Christ in his incarnation and death completely comes under God’s wrath because of our wickedness, so because of our faith, our embrace of him, we come under his righteousness, totally and completely. Jesus Christ is the end of God’s wrath for all those who have faith. If that is presumptuous, it is being presumptuous in Christ not in ourselves.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Saved and Living in Safety (v. 15)*

Although human enemies, like the Babylonians, may still threaten us, they are really nothing when they are bereft of being the rod of God’s wrath. Indeed, they may even be conquerable in military terms. But even if they aren’t, and the land in which we live is lost, and our calling is simply to bear the cross, we are not really defeated. For we have the promise of a righteousness that will bear fruit forever: keeping us safe within “the steadfast love of God” (v. 11) in Christ. Indeed, we might find ourselves living like Jeremiah: speaking words of warning and promise, all to the ultimate end that the world might be saved and live in safety (v. 15).