

First Sunday of Advent, Year C, Old Testament

THE LORD IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jeremiah 33:14-16

First Sunday of Advent

Analysis by Peter Keyel

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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."

(Author's note: For the diagnosis, the context of this passage is important, especially Jeremiah 33:4-7:

⁴ For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the houses of this city and the houses of the kings of Judah that were torn down to make a defense against the siege ramps and before the sword: ⁵ The Chaldeans are coming in to fight and to fill them with the dead bodies of those whom I shall strike down in my anger and my wrath, for I have hidden my face from this city because of all their wickedness. ⁶ I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to

them abundance of prosperity and security. ⁷ I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first.)

DIAGNOSIS: Death and Destruction

Step 1 Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Justice

When we are dealing with the reality of exile and trying to make sense of it, or threats to our homes and our way of life, we want to understand the justice of it. Injustice makes us burn and many of us dedicate ourselves to social justice, or criminal justice, or even everyday justice. It's even commanded in Micah 6:8. We like that verse because it tells us what to do and how to live. But the Chaldeans of the world (Jeremiah 33:5; soon to be part of Babylon) keep making our lives hard, because they like war, reject our ideas of war, discourse, and everything else, and will totally ruin our nation. Not unlike how we might feel about Republicans or Democrats during a US election cycle—except Judah was under siege. The real dead bodies of God's chosen people were piling up. This isn't any kind of justice we know.

Step 2 Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Wickedness

Since we are concerned with justice, the first question we may pose is whether we deserve what we get. If we don't feel we deserve it, we assume it is injustice, and we are victims. And really, had the Judeans really done anything deserving of the Chaldeans sacking their city and carrying them off into exile? Does anyone deserve that? Are people really wicked? Or are we all just victims of injustice?

Step 3 Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Wrath

When we start coming up with our own ideas of justice, we do so at our peril. If we've been loving justice, why the accusations of wickedness? Why the wrath? And really, does anyone deserve God's wrath? God's wrath tends to be something that we don't think anyone deserves (except maybe those awful so-and-so's). However, when we challenge God's wrath, we find ourselves opposed to God. But who wants to follow a God who strikes down his own people in wrath or rejects them for their own wickedness (which we may not even be convinced is wickedness) anyway?

But the Chaldeans still filled Jerusalem with dead bodies. Even if we follow our own paths of justice, bad things still happen. Deadly, horrible, bad things. Sometimes because of our own actions, but other times because of competing views of justice. Whether or not we call it God's wrath, or God hiding his face from us, the explanation doesn't stop these things from happening or make them less bad.

PROGNOSIS: Salvation and Safety

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Saved

Juxtaposed into this mess of death are the words of a prophet: "I am going to bring it recovery and healing."... "I will fulfill the promise I made."... "Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety." Jerusalem being filled with dead bodies (then or now) is not God's final Word on the subject of justice. The exiles eventually return. More importantly, God comes into the world as Jesus, the "righteous branch" that springs up for us. Yet Jesus's righteousness is not that of God's wrath. Indeed, Jesus suffers the same wrath and death we do. God's justice towards Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise. Jesus is

raised, and he promises that this gift of life is for us as well.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Righteousness

In the face of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, wickedness has no power. But neither do we cling to our own ideas of justice. Instead we trust that God will show us justice, and that wrath or whatever we call it, is not the final word. The prophet's words speak to us of God's coming justice: "And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'"

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Mercy

Interestingly, the prophet does not say that we will "execute justice and righteousness in the land," but instead Jesus will. In fact, we have been saved from our view of justice and freed to reflect to others our understanding of the justice God has shown Jesus: mercy. When we reflect this mercy, it looks like "recovery and healing," "reveal[ing] to them abundance of prosperity and security." And not just any "them." Those Chaldeans, those Republicans or Democrats, those who may threaten our very way of life or worldview. We deal with them in mercy, not because we are commanded to, but because we want to.