

Nov. 29, 2015 – Jeremiah 33:14-16 (Epistle: 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 Gospel: Luke 21:25–36)

Jesus, The Branch, Brings Salvation, Security, and Righteousness

“Behold, the days are coming that I will perform that good thing which I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah” (v. 14). These are the words that the Lord speaks to the prophet Jeremiah in our Old Testament reading today. They provided much-needed comfort to Jeremiah and the people of His day, and these words give us the comfort that we need today as well.

Jeremiah lived during a time of international turmoil. The northern ten tribes of Israel had been taken into captivity by Assyria and the southern two tribes of Judah were being threatened by Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar had come and was besieging Jerusalem, and was about to take the people into exile, and destroy the temple. In the midst of all this uncertainty, it must have seemed that God’s promises for Israel and Judah were far from being fulfilled. But the Lord tells Jeremiah here that He “will perform that good thing which [He had] promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah”.

The phrase translated here as “that good thing” might better be translated “the good word” or “the good news”. That is what the word “gospel” means. God is here referring to the good news that He would send His own Son to be the Savior of the world. The Lord speaks of the coming of His Son when He tells Jeremiah, “In those days and at that time I will cause to grow up to David A Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth” (v. 2).

Jesus was this promised “Branch of Righteousness” that sprung up from line of David. The word “branch” here refers a “sprout” or “shoot”. It may seem like an odd way to describe Jesus. But consider that the baby born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago must not have seemed like much to the shepherds who came to see Him on the night of His birth. But like a small shoot that can grow into a huge tree, think of the difference that that one baby has made to the whole world!

The Lord further explains this image of the Branch through prophet Zechariah almost 200 years later: “Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, And He shall build the temple of the Lord; Yes, He shall build the temple of the Lord. He shall bear the glory, And shall sit and rule on His throne; So He shall be a priest on His throne, And the counsel of peace shall be between them both” (Zechariah 6:12-13). In Zechariah the Lord tells us that Jesus’ work will branch out into all the world and He will be both king and priest.

In Zechariah God says that Jesus “shall build the temple of the Lord”. When the Jews of Zechariah’s day heard this, they probably thought of the temple in Jerusalem. This may also be what comes to our minds. But Jesus never built a physical temple. In fact, Jesus told His disciples that the great temple in Jerusalem that they admired so much would be destroyed (Matthew 24:1-2, Luke 19:41-44, Mark 13:1-2). But the Lord’s temple that Jesus has built is not a physical one. “God, who made the world and everything in it...does not dwell in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24). Rather, the temple Jesus has built is the congregation of all those who have faith in Him. Peter writes: “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). You are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in you (1 Corinthians 3:16). We are here today as a demonstration of how this Branch has branched out to build God’s temple in all the world.

The Lord tells Jeremiah in our reading today that this Branch “shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth” (v. 15). Jesus executed judgment and righteousness during His time on earth. The Jewish leaders were constantly trying to trip Him up in His words, but He always replied with the just and righteous answer. He avoided their traps and left them speechless and amazed with His words (e.g. Matthew 22:22, Mark 12:34).

Jesus also executed judgment and righteousness in the earth by perfectly fulfilling God's law on our behalf. He was perfectly righteous. He never did anything wrong. He never sinned or fell short of what His Heavenly Father required (Hebrews 4:15, 2 Corinthians 5:21). He was completely obedient to God, even to the point of dying on the cross to take away the sins of the world. By taking our transgressions upon Himself and dying on the cross in our place, Jesus has indeed brought righteousness to the earth.

The Lord declares that "*In those days Judah will be saved*" (v. 16). It must have been tempting for Jeremiah and those who heard this message to think of a physical salvation. Jerusalem was under siege and was about to fall. God has previously told them in chapter 29: "*After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place*" (Jeremiah 29:10). It would be easy to take this promise of Judah's salvation simply as a restatement of God's promise to bring them back to the land of Israel.

But the salvation that the Branch has brought is so much greater! It goes far beyond earthly blessings and returning someone to their homeland. It is an eternal salvation from our sin and from the eternal death that our sins deserve. Our sins have separated us from God, but Jesus has taken them away. You now have a perfect, eternal inheritance in a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13).

When God refers to Judah, He is not referring to an area in the Middle East, but rather to His people. When the Branch comes, His people will be saved. The same is true when He says, "*And Jerusalem will dwell safely*" (v. 16). He is not referring to the earthly city, the capital of Judah, but to His people among whom He, Himself, dwells (see 2 Corinthians 6:16, Revelation 21:3). God promises that we will dwell safely.

When you hear this, what image does that create in your mind? I tend to think of safety as a more abstract concept. I think of it as the absence of danger. But the word used here stresses the *feeling* of being safe and secure, not just the fact. You may be completely safe in a given situation but still not *feel* safe. For example, I may be perfectly safe going up in a ferris wheel, but because I am afraid of heights, I wouldn't feel very safe.

But what God is telling you here is that you will not only be safe, but you will feel safe because He is with you. Your well-being and security comes from Him. You can trust Him and be confident that He is there for you. You can know that God is there for you because He has sent Jesus to bring you to Himself. As we read in Psalm 46 on Reformation Sunday: "*God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn*" (Psalm 46:5). You dwell safely, not just because God has set up a safe place, but because His is there with you to comfort you and ensure your safety!

The Lord concludes this section with these words: "*And this is the name by which she will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS*" (v. 16). This reminds us the The Lord *is* our righteousness. The righteousness that Jesus gives us is the foundation of all that we have been talking about. It is the reason for we are saved and the reason we can live in safety.

God's righteousness is what we need above all else! We do not have any righteousness of our own. We are, by nature, unrighteous in God's sight. We have failed to do what God wants time and time again. If we were to stand before God based on our own righteousness, we would not be saved; we could not dwell in safety. Instead, we would be left with nothing but a fearful expectation of the fiery judgment of God.

But God “*made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Branch of righteousness has brought us the righteousness that we need to stand before Him without fear: the righteousness of the Lord Himself.

This righteousness is worth far more than anything else you could ever want or have. Paul gave up all things and considered them garbage so that, as he said: “*I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith*” (Philippians 3:9).

Salvation does not consist of Jesus giving us the perfect example for us to follow, or even God *making* us righteous. But salvation consists in this: that the Lord *is* our righteousness. Because our salvation depends only on Jesus’ perfect righteousness credited to us, our salvation is certain. We can trust in the Lord’s righteousness, because it is perfect and complete; Our safety is assured because it depends on God and His righteousness alone.

As we begin our march toward Christmas this Advent season, remember the gift of His righteousness that Jesus has given you. His righteousness saves you and allows you to enter His presence where you will dwell safely. May your refrain forever be: “The Lord is my righteousness”
Amen

Rock of Ages Evangelical Lutheran Church

www.GrandRapidsLutheran.org

Pastor Peter T. Evensen

616-322-9167 (cell) – peterevensen@icloud.com