

Smaller and Better Jeremiah 33:12-18

When I moved into the dorm my first year at Calvin College, our floor participated in a whole number of bonding exercises during orientation. One of those exercises was the game, “Bigger or Better.” The premise of the game was simple. We divided into four teams. Each team was given a paper clip.

We were then sent out into the warm September evening, into the neighbourhoods surrounding Calvin, to knock on doors and ask if the good people inside had anything bigger or better they would trade for the paperclip. Then we’d move on to the next house, to trade our new object for something bigger or better, continuing on until, at the end of the allotted time, we returned to our dorm to compare our treasures.

Generally, people were compliant. We traded a paperclip for a pen, a pen for a spare can opener, a can opener for a skateboard long unused, and so on, and so on.

I think my team ended up coming back with a toilet seat. That remained in our common space next to the fireplace until maintenance decided it had to go.

But the winning team...they came back with a Dr. Pepper fridge. It was exactly as it sounds - a full-sized fridge with a glass door and a Dr. Pepper logo across the top. Someone was undoubtedly very glad to get the thing out of their garage to this group of willing college students who then hauled it back to campus and up onto the third floor, where it stayed for the rest of the year, unplugged and useless. Merely a trophy reminding us all of the winning team’s glory. It may not have been better than a paper clip. But it certainly was bigger.

Though bigger is better, right? A bigger house. A bigger TV. A larger TikTok following. It's the politicians with a big presence, a big campaign budget, who get the votes. We don't drive to see someone's lone lit-up wreath on their front door, but we'll make a trip to see an entire front yard bedecked with inflated reindeer and sparkling Christmas lights. The bigger, the flashier, the more in-your-face something is, the better. When we hear "something will be better" ...we have expectations of what that thing will be. And often...we expect it to be...bigger.

The people of Judah certainly had a set of expectations that shaped how they heard the prophecies and promises relayed to them by the prophets. And when we come to Jeremiah 33, the people hearing this prophecy are in a bad place. They need to imagine something better than their current reality.

Because their current reality is grim. In 606 B.C., Babylon invades Judah, the southern kingdom, takes a large group of people into captivity, and turns the Judean king into a puppet king for Babylon.

The Babylonians invade a second time in 597, carrying off King Jehoiachin and another group of Judeans, placing Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, on the throne.

When Zedekiah has been king for ten years, the Babylonians once more come bearing down on Judah, laying siege to Jerusalem. Things don't look good for Zedekiah, or for Judah.

But they should have seen this coming. Because for the last forty years, a guy named Jeremiah has been telling them this destruction was coming. The book of Jeremiah isn't a happy read. For forty years, covered in thirty chapters, Jeremiah tells one king after another – the Babylonians are going to attack you and subdue you and take you into exile. God is finished with your sinful ways. Enough is enough. Each of

you kings is worse than the last – more unjust, more evil, more heard-hearted, more unrepentant. So God will take away your throne, and your land, and everything you thought you could count on, so you'll realize who gave you all these things in the first place, and turn back to him."

Understandably, the kings of Judah don't like this message. They preferred the message of other prophets who swooped in and out of the royal courts, saying, "Oh, this won't last long. The Babylonians will take some people into exile, but then within two years God will smite the Babylonians and everyone will return and everything will be exactly as it was, or even better."

Only that doesn't happen. And those false prophets end up dying. And the only prophet left standing is Jeremiah, preaching his doom and gloom.

Until one day Zedekiah has enough, and he throws Jeremiah in prison to try and keep him quiet.

Which, unsurprisingly, doesn't work. Jeremiah keeps writing his prophecies – to the exiles in Babylon, telling them to hunker down, plant some gardens, marry, have kids, and settle in for a while – and to Zedekiah, telling him that even more destruction is on the way and Zedekiah, too, will be taken into exile.

But then Jeremiah's prophecies take a turn. In the middle of the book of Jeremiah, chapters 30-33, we have what's known as the Book of Consolation. Jerusalem is a war-torn city. Babylon is breathing down the people's necks. Jeremiah sits languishing in a prison. The prophets who once said this Babylonian siege wouldn't be so bad are now saying there's no hope left.

But in the middle of this darkness, God gives Jeremiah some words of hope.

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; and he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord our Righteous Saviour.”

This promise God refers to is the one he made to David in 2 Samuel 7, when God tells David “your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” Only now it doesn’t look like God has kept his end of things. In the last years of Israel and Judah, the monarchy has been a disaster. Evil men have sat on the throne, and they haven’t even been proper kings – mere puppets for Assyria and Babylon.

And now, Israel is no more, and the last king of Judah is headed for ruin. God’s people have no power, no dignity, no authority, no leadership. This promise of God has come to nothing. The people of Israel can’t imagine how this is all going to work out in the end.

But here, in the darkness of this despair, God says to the people, “I’ve got something in store that’s better than you can imagine.”

“I will fulfill this promise,” he says, “but it won’t look the way you imagine it. It won’t look bigger than the Babylonians, or more impressive than the Assyrians, or more majestic than the Egyptians. Most of you would probably walk right by this answer to the promise, holding out for something bigger and flashier and more like what you expect.”

“You’ll walk on by, because this answer won’t be a strong and mighty oak tree, but a mere sapling. A branch, a twig, coming up out of a dead and broken stump.”

The answer to this promise will be a baby, who enters the world in a nondescript town, born to a nondescript family, whose first cries are muffled by the snorting of animals.

But this child, this promised one, will do what all the last kings of Judah failed to do. He will do what is just and right in the land.

There’s some irony baked into Jeremiah 33, having to do with names and titles. Zedekiah, the king who imprisoned Jeremiah, who will be the last king of Judah before the exile – his name means “The Lord is righteous.”

This new king that God promises will bear the name “The Lord is our righteousness.” While Zedekiah might have borne the name, this new king will embody the reality. He will be what Zedekiah, and all the kings before him, were not – perfectly just, wise, and righteous.

He will be the perfect king. But not only will he be a king. Jeremiah continues in his prophecy, “David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel, nor will the Levitical priests ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to present sacrifices.”

Not only will this new king reign with justice and righteousness, he will also represent the people before God continually, making possible an eternally right relationship between God and his people.

How will he do that?

He’ll do that because he is God.

And he'll do that because he is human. He will be able to represent us before the face of God because he will be one of us. Born into the world as a baby.

Because Jesus, the king that is the answer to God's promise to David, was smaller than anything anyone expected, he was so much better than anything anyone could have hoped for. He was in fact *bigger* than anything anyone could have hoped for.

His mission was bigger than what anyone had imagined. He wasn't just interested in restoring Israel to political power, but in restoring *the whole creation*, reconciling all people to their creator, ushering in a totally new kind of kingdom, marked by justice, righteousness, and peace.

In this stable in Bethlehem was born a king who was at once a smaller, bigger, and better answer to the promise than anything David could have imagined or expected.

I wonder if, for us today, we also have expectations that are too small, too narrow...because they're focused on that which is big.

We live in a post-Christian world. No longer can we count on a cultural familiarity with Christianity, on prayers being offered in schools, on nativity scenes popping up in front of city hall, on people saying, "Merry Christmas" instead of "Happy Holidays."

We know this about our world. But I wonder if some part of us is hoping to return to those days, if we're waiting for another Constantine who will "make Christianity great again," and bring about a day when our institutions and political systems and culture are all...Christian. When Christianity wields significant cultural influence. Because when we imagine Christianity having an impact on the world – something we all want – that's what we imagine. That's what we expect.

But maybe this passage from Jeremiah is inviting us to think smaller. To not relegate the influence of our faith to those things that are big and obvious and powerful, but to wonder what impact just a sprout might have?

This week my aunt posted a poem to her story on Instagram. It's called "Small Kindnesses," written by Danusha Laméris. It goes like this:

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you go by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead – you first," "I like your hat."

What if these brief moments of exchange are the true dwelling of the holy?

In Matthew 13, Jesus – the Lord our Righteous Saviour – tells a parable about a plant. A small, tiny, plant.

“The kingdom of heaven” he says, “is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

The kingdom that the Lord our Righteous Saviour ushered in grows through the spreading and multiplying of small branches, small acts of kindness, small deeds of righteousness and faithfulness. Not because we who do those deeds are powerful or mighty. But because the one who works through us is powerful and mighty, perfect in righteousness and justice, perfect in holiness. And so these small acts of faith become something so much bigger – and so much better – than we could ever imagine.

So, we ask, in this season of Advent, who are we waiting for?

Jeremiah tells us – we are waiting for the baby who will be born in a stable, who is the Lord our Righteousness, who is smaller than we expected, and better than we could have hoped, and who works through us to spread the good news of his kingdom through the small deeds of faith that seep into every corner of creation.