

## Light a Candle

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, November 29, 2009)

Jeremiah 33:14-16 <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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.”

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 (TEV) <sup>9</sup>Now we can give thanks to our God for you. We thank him for the joy we have in his presence because of you. <sup>10</sup>Day and night we ask him with all our heart to let us see you personally and supply what is needed in your faith.

<sup>11</sup>May our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus prepare the way for us to come to you! <sup>12</sup>May the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow more and more and become as great as our love for you. <sup>13</sup>In this way he will strengthen you, and you will be perfect and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all who belong to him.

Luke 21:25-28 <sup>25</sup>“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup>People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup>Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

In the year 722 before Christ, the Assyrian Empire destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Assyrian method of subjugating conquered people was to move them around. Leaders and the more capable people were made slaves and given the most menial tasks. Others were scattered in other conquered lands, mixed together with all nationalities, so that within a few generations all sense of identity would be lost, and people would think of themselves as Assyrians, not Jews or Canaanites or anything else. Within 100 years, there were very few people from that northern kingdom who thought of themselves as Israelites. Perhaps then already, the expression began regarding the 10 lost tribes of Israel.

Things were not much better for the people in the Southern Kingdom. In 612 a new empire was rising in the East, and Assyria was defeated, Nineveh was crushed. Babylon immediately began to rule over all the provinces of Assyria, and brought incredible pressure on the small, neighboring kingdoms, without having to even fight a battle. Small nations, such as Judea, paid a high tribute to Babylon in return for “security.” By the year 606, young men with promise were being taken away from Judea and sent to Babylon for retraining, so that they could become puppet governors for the Babylonian empire. Occasional resistance was made by the people of Jerusalem and Judea, which only brought the wrath of the empire down on them. There were sieges and battles when the people of Jerusalem boiled their sandals in order to make broth to sustain themselves.

This was the time and place of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet. We can understand why, knowing the circumstances of his people and his city. Four times his prophesy breaks into a lament, with words such as the beginning of chapter 9: “Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people.”

So the words from Jeremiah this morning stand in stark contrast to much of his writing. What hope, what optimism in the words I read earlier, “In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” That is so different from his weeping, almost like a light shining in the darkness of his usual words.

There is a parallel between Jeremiah's situation in Jerusalem and Paul's situation in Thessalonica, except for Paul it was personal. He had been in Philippi for a while and had established a congregation there, but problems with a local fortune-teller and her owners landed Paul and Silas in jail. They were set free through a miracle but decided to move on to Thessalonica. Things were not much better there. Some of the local Jews became very jealous and formed a mob, which led to some civic unrest. Several members of the church that they had established were arrested, and the congregation helped Paul and Silas escape under cover of darkness. Paul moved on to Corinth but it seems that in some ways his heart was still in Thessalonica. We can understand his words as he prays for the people there, that he thanks God for them, but he is writing as if he wants to go back and see them face to face. Can you imagine how much danger Paul would be in if he went back to Thessalonica, not to mention the fact that he would be endangering the whole congregation? In contrast to this bleak situation, Paul's prayers and words of praise are almost like a light shining in the darkness.

Some of the darkest days of recent history were during World War II. Victor Frankl, the famous psychiatrist remembers an experience during that time. He had been at work on a trench just outside the fence surrounding the death camp, Dachau. He wrote, "The dawn was gray around us; Gray was the sky above, gray the snow in the pale light of dawn, Gray rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and gray their faces." He goes on to write that he was ready to die. It was as if the gray bleakness surround him had claws, digging deeper and colder into his very soul. Suddenly it was as if a voice within him cried out against the bleak darkness. The voice seemed to be shouting "yes" against the "no" of his gray surroundings. And at that same instant, he saw a light was lit in a distant farmhouse. The light made him think of life and warmth, of families and love. And Frankl wrote that in that instant, he began to live again.

Have you had any dark, bleak, gray times in your life? Maybe you can remember some low point, maybe the loss of a loved one or a time of grave illness. Maybe you were in war, something like Jeremiah, or circumstances where you saw no way out, like Frankl. Or broken homes, or loss of a job, loss of income – there are so many things that can bring us down into that dark valley. Could you see the light? Did you look for the light of God, and did you see it, and find warmth and hope in the light of God?

Jesus spoke about bleak times. He used apocalyptic terms that would have been familiar to the people of his day, terms such as signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, or even the roaring of the seas, an image that may have come to life for some with of our recent Tsunamis, and which movie makers are capitalizing on in a new movie titled, "2012." I hope and pray that none of us will ever face such floods or any other apocalyptic events, but we have all had our dark times. Don't let your head hang down when that happens. As Jesus said, "stand up and raise your head, because your redemption is drawing near."

We just lit a candle on our Advent Wreath. We could talk about counting down the four Sundays to Christmas, but that is not the point. There will be enough advertisements reminding you of how many shopping days before Christmas. But I want you to focus on the light – the light that comes from God, the light that the prophets foretold, the light that shines in the darkness, as the Gospel of John records, the light that brings us more than warmth, a light that brings us love, and hope, and the assurance of God's promise.

There may well be signs in the heavens, storms in the seas, wars and rumors of wars, but don't lose heart. Whatever crisis may come in your life, God is greater, and God's promises are sure. God will bring you through, and draw you to his side, in God's time. Look to God's light. Amen.