

# ***The World as We'd Like It to Be***

**Jeremiah 33:14-22**

I am an avid newshound. I've always been this way, even from my youth. I consider myself an "information gatherer", as I'm quite interested in keeping up with what's going on in the world, both near and far. In the days before the internet, I relied on network television and major newspapers to inform me; in more recent years, I get it online usually from those very same newspapers and network news, along with a few other trusted sites. The internet is just a faster, broader, and more convenient way to hustle for headlines.

I will admit, being a daily consumer of journalistic reporting isn't always good for my soul. There are days when I become cynical and jaded, emotionally distressed and depressed, beyond my usual morose outlook and churlish personality. Frankly, most news we receive is not pleasant; it tends to be alarming, if not disturbing, and when 24/7 coverage keeps us aware of what's wrong with the world, it's no wonder people are filled with despair. Reality, it would seem, is not the world as we'd like it to be.

Yet, at the same time, we know journalism has an important role—to educate and inform the public and to hold people accountable for wrongdoing. If we didn't have an independent press as a source of public accountability, how would we assess the times we're in, i.e., the state of our society or public officials, policies, or leadership? How would we know what needs to be fixed or if life could be better? Yes, the news isn't usually very hopeful most of the time, but a free and independent press is a vital institution—not something to vilify or discard from our democracy.

That said, there are days when I wonder about the impact of the daily news upon my own spirit and soul. Am I mindful of what I absorb and

digest, mentally and emotionally, and how it affects me? Do I passively (and somewhat thoughtlessly) take everything in without filters or discernment? Of course, news and information aren't the only things that affect our attitude and outlook. There are all types of input from other forms of media which influence our minds and emotions. In small and often subtle ways they influence what we think about certain topics or feel about particular people or situations. Sometimes we are fed a steady diet of what amounts to mental junk-food.

I don't think it's only a matter of shutting off the television or avoiding my smartphone or computer. Instead, it's a matter of intentionally balancing what we read or watch with things which are more hopeful and healing, so we can keep a more realistic perspective on what our world is really like. The "real world" for most of us doesn't make headlines; instead, it consists of ordinary interactions and incidental episodes where good things occur and people, as a rule, treat us well. The cynicism many of us feel at times isn't really justified by what happens in our daily routine; in truth, life is far better and more gracious to us than we often believe it is.

Interestingly, I'm often reminded of this by those who probably have more reason to be jaded and filled with despair and hopelessness than anyone, living as they do with difficult medical conditions or other challenging circumstances. Yet, in many instances, there still exists a delightful outlook and sense of humor. I never cease to be amazed by such people, who are mindful of little mercies in their day, who don't wallow in misery, preoccupied with their pain, and who often have a sincere concern for others who are far better off than they. I could name names, but I think you know them or those who are like them. I admire dear ones like this

because I'm cognizant of how challenging and complicated a normal day is for them, often filled with endless and silent suffering. And yet, rarely do they dwell on it; tears or complaints don't appear to be their daily bread. They have found a way to deal with miserable conditions by focusing on what's good for their soul and embracing it. I frequently sense that after spending time with such soulful people, I come away lighter in spirit as well; their outlook is mercifully contagious.

Now we know the power of the mind and spirit over the body is well-documented in medical science as well as in conventional wisdom and old wives' tales. It's one reason mindfulness has become a topic of interest among medical professionals, as it is in general culture. But it's more than that. I sense there's also the power of hope at work, which is transforming the human spirit from its default resignation toward fear and despair. What people hope for might differ according to each situation, but there's something about consciously choosing to hope rather than wallow in despair—to look for the good in dire situations and circumstances—to be grateful for the graces that life offers us each day—all of this is transformative. At times, it is hope based on something concrete and tangible (e.g., a hope for a new treatment); sometimes it's hope that is generated simply by imagining the world as we'd like it to be—free of pain, free of suffering, and free of sorrow.

Our human capacity to hope through the gift of imagination is an asset we all have wired within us, even if we don't call upon it as we could or should. The imagination envisions and dreams of what might yet be—of what is possible. Imagination, in many situations, is just as compelling and meaningful as hard evidence. With imagination, each of us possesses the potential to generate the will and energy—the drive and desire—to turn

what we hope for into something real. We dream of possibilities and often those dreams translate into doing the very things that make it possible. No athlete begins her season without a dream that compels her to dedicate herself toward her goals. No musician sees the dawn of his career without a vision he has followed to arrive at that desired place in life. Hope is born of dreams—dreams of having the world as we'd like it to be. Hope lifts the spirits and a healthy spirit makes for a better life. It converts cynicism into positive spiritual energy and ambition. It reshapes our thinking and the way we perceive reality. Despair only grabs hold of us when we lose the ability to dream of what might still be possible.

We see this power of hope evident in these ancient texts. The Scriptures we savor in this season are various proclamations of imaginative hope—in many cases, messianic hope—delivered to those who were living in deep darkness. Almost every Advent text has a context in misery, i.e. the Babylonian exile, where much of what the people of Judah held to be sacred was lost—the loss of their homes, their villages, their kingdom. Especially hard to accept was the destruction of their capital city, Jerusalem, and the temple itself, along with the tragic deaths or exile of their people by this foreign imperial power. Israel and Judah as kingdoms were gone—vanquished from the earth—left in a heap of soot and ashes, broken stone, and broken-hearted victims. All the religious trust and political confidence they once possessed in the assurance of a Davidic dynasty devolved into utter ruin and despair. When you are living in deep darkness, you know exactly how hopeless and depressing that miserable state is.

Yet, writing from exile in Babylon hundreds of miles from his homeland, perhaps even from prison for a time, Jeremiah began to dream of life restored. All he had was a dream, nothing more. There was nothing

to justify it; it would even be over two generations into the future before the initial signs of deliverance would appear. Yet, somehow, instead of resigning to despair and suffering, Jeremiah was able to muster his imagination to dream of a world as he and his chastened people yearned for it to be:

In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety...For thus says YHWH: David shall never lack a successor to sit on the throne of the house of Israel and the Levitical priests shall never lack someone in my presence to offer whole offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make other offerings every day.

How preposterous this must have sounded to those around him—even to Jeremiah when he thought about it! How unrealistic it must have seemed! On what basis did he envision a restoration of Israel and Judah? Jerusalem no longer existed, there was no temple, no palace or king! The priests and Levites were either dead or trying to survive in a foreign land. Jeremiah's imagination had gone wild; this broken, pitiful man had gone mad!

Sometimes, sheer madness is what radical hope looks like when you see it in someone else's dream. But to the dreamers themselves—the ones who can imagine the world as they would like it to be—life still is conceiving possibilities. Dreamers envision the future as a way forward toward something better. One must have a future in mind to find your way there. Those who mope around mourning the past give in to their brokenness and despair. Endless grief and sadness bring a miserable vicious downward spiral to anyone's life. It's self-defeating. Whereas, hope is born out of a dream of what the world might yet be. It's future-oriented. With the dream comes the inspiration to move in that direction and summon the support and commitment to pursue it. This begins the process for how, over time, hope becomes realized. The world as we want it to be is already taking shape within us and among us.

In this season of Advent, in the wake of an anniversary year that has brought many good things to our church, while we continue to face many challenges as a society and nation, I invite you (implore you even) to begin your dream for the world as you'd like it to be. Let it begin to speak to your soul. May your dream include, if not reflect, the dream that Jesus offers us, for a world that can be better and more just than the present—one where healing occurs instead of harm, one that is more equitable and fair, one less violent and destructive--relative to what we witness in the present. Allow that hope to grow and generate gratitude for what of this dream is already within your sight and grasp. Celebrate those merciful little signs of it among us.

May we dream this dream so that it nourishes our souls and nurtures every day what is good and hopeful within our minds and hearts, so that we become encouraged, and not discouraged by setbacks or how our lives or the world as a whole appear to be at times. Together, as a community of faith, as spiritual beings on our human journeys, and as people inspired by God, may we create the good that is possible in this world and will yet come to pass in time. For that is the dream we share in this season when we anticipate the recurring birth of the Christ child within us and the presence of God among us, as the good news of heaven comes once again to those living in deep darkness.

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