

Christmas will soon be here again. It is an exciting time of year for many people. Decorations are going up everywhere we look. Christmas music is playing on the radio, the internet, or even as hold music on the phone. People everywhere are getting ready for Christmas. But that excitement is not just in the Church. The world is also getting ready for Christmas, at least what it considers to be Christmas. But the world has many ideas about the meaning of Christmas. How often, for example, do you hear that Christmas means we should be better people? How often do you hear the Christmas means we should be nicer to one another? We should all get along, because it's Christmas! How often do you hear that the "holiday spirit" means we should be happy or at least feel festive? Just look around you, Christians. It's everywhere. It's in the music, on the decorations, even on the packaging of our food. Companies put out special seasonal flavors, all in the attempt to create that "holiday cheer."

But the problem with all of these is that they do not require Christ to be born. It doesn't matter if Christ was born in Bethlehem if the whole meaning of Christmas is to be better, be nicer, be happy, and so forth. The message would be the same even if Christ had never been born. The world wants you to believe that we can find the meaning of Christmas without Christ. But Christmas is nothing without Christ. Christ was born in Bethlehem, and He was born for many reasons, reasons which change everything about our lives. So as we go through the season of Advent this year, Jeremiah will show us those reasons. Jeremiah will show us why Christmas is nothing without Christ.

The first reason that Jeremiah gives in our reading is that the birth of Christ gives us hope. We can see this, because when he wrote this chapter, Israel was going through a very difficult time. Nebuchadnezzar had recently captured Jerusalem and made it subject to himself. Israel was no longer an independent kingdom, but ruled by a foreign power. We are also told in 2 Kings chapter 24, verse 14, that Nebuchadnezzar "carried away all Jerusalem and all the officials and all the mighty men of valor, 10,000 captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained, except the poorest people of the land." In other words, he had taken most of the people out of the land and forced them to live somewhere else, all in an attempt to prevent them from fighting against him again.

It is hard for us to understand how devastating all of this was for Israel. Everything centered on the land for them. Their lives focused on the land. Their future focused on the land. Even their ideas about God depended on the land. God had put them there, after all. It was their land! But now they were being taken away, and their whole future disappeared along with it. How could they be ruled by Babylon and still be God's people? As Psalm 137 puts it: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

But what made it harder still was that all of this had come from God. Jeremiah made it perfectly clear that the Lord had sent all of this upon them. The Lord raised up Babylon against them. The Lord carried away the captives into exile. The Lord sent this judgment upon them because of their sins. All of their idolatry, all of their greed, all of their adulteries, all of their abuse of the poor – all of these sins had brought judgment down upon them. Knowing that, it was easy for them to think that there was no hope for them at all. It was easy for them to think that they had no future whatsoever. If all of this had come from God, what could they do? Where could they go? Would God forget His promises? Would they be exiles forever? What would happen in the days ahead? Where could they find hope in the midst of it all?

Christians, we also face an uncertain future, though for different reasons. Perhaps we are worried about the future of this country. Are we going to continue to have economic problems? Will the price of food ever come down? It is easy to be anxious when even our basic necessities cost more than we remember. Or are we worried about political problems in our country? It seems like they get worse and worse with each election, rather than waiting a couple years in between. We can't even be sure about the elections themselves these days. There are too many questions surrounding them to take away every doubt. Where is it all going? What will happen?

Perhaps we are worried about the future of the Church. We live in a time where churches, even whole church bodies, compromise with the world. Some outright deny Biblical truth, saying that it's outdated or no longer relevant. Some adopt the world's way of speaking, even changing Biblical language to fit. Some simply compromise here and there, unwilling to stand against the world. Will that happen to our church? Will we bend on the truth, even while we claim to be following after God? What does the future hold for God's Church in these dark days?

Or perhaps we simply wonder about our own future and how to deal with our own personal problems. How can we deal with problems which never seem to come to an end? How can we face the future when we have to struggle or deal with conflicts which never seem to be fixed? Why does it seem like we have to face all these problems alone? What does the future hold for me?

How, then, should we face these problems? Where do we find hope in the face of an uncertain future? The world tries to find hope by simply forgetting its problems. Just ignore all these issues, it says. It's the Christmas season. Forget all of your troubles and focus on holiday cheer. Forget about what is happening in the world and just be nicer to one another. Forget about the future and be better people now. In that way, you will be able to face an uncertain future. There's no time to be sad or anxious or worried, because it's Christmas! But there is no hope in that. There is no hope in simply trying to get into a festive spirit for the holidays. What is needed is a real hope, something which helps us to face whatever the future may bring.

That hope, Jeremiah tells us, is Jesus Christ. Jeremiah pointed to the coming birth of Christ to give Israel hope for its own future. At that time, Jeremiah said, God would restore the fortunes of Jacob. The time of weeping would give way to joy, because the city would be rebuilt. The palace would stand in its own place once more. People would hear the sound of thanksgiving come out of Jerusalem again, not the sound of weeping. They would hear the sound of merry-making and not grief. God would multiply them, so that they would be even greater than they were before. All of this would happen because One would come to restore them. As Jeremiah says in verse 21: "Their prince shall be one of themselves; their ruler shall come out from their midst; I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me, for who would dare of himself to approach me? declares the Lord." Their Prince would not be a foreign king, but would come from among them. Their Ruler would be like them, just as the Lord promised. He would draw near to God, because He is God – the long-promised Son of David. He would be Christ the Lord, their King, their Savior. Christ would bring them back. Christ would restore their fortunes. Christ would make them God's people once more. God would not cast them off. All of their troubles would pass away. They had hope again, because Christ would be born, just as God said.

All of this sounds good for Israel, we might say, but how does it give us hope? Christ has already been born. We're not looking forward to Christ being born in Bethlehem. All of that is in the past. How can the past give us hope for the future?

It gives us hope for two reasons, Christians. First of all, it gives us hope because it shows that Christ is still our King. Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father forever. He is one like us, one from our midst, God and Man in one Christ. Jesus was not born so that He could be like us for a little while. Jesus was born so that He would be like us forever, even now. Our God has suffered as we suffer. Our God has faced all the temptations we now face. But now He sits in victory forever. Therefore, no matter what happens in the days ahead, Christians, Jesus has overcome and will overcome them all. There is nothing which can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The birth of Christ gives us hope because it shows that Jesus is our King.

But it also gives us hope because it shows that God always keeps His promises. God promised Israel that a King would be born to them, and God kept that promise. God did what He said He would do then. God will also do what He says He will do now. God has promised to be with us even to the end of the age. Nothing will ever take us away from Him. God has promised that Jesus will return in glory. Christ will come to set all things right. God has promised that Jesus will judge the living and the dead. Christ will give us the justice we could not find now. God has promised that evil will come to an end. The things which we suffer now will not go on forever. We have a future, not in this world, but in God, and that is a future which will never come to an end. The birth of Christ gives us hope because it shows us that God always keeps His promises.

So no matter what we may be facing, Christians, we have hope for the future in Jesus Christ. No matter how uncertain it seems, no matter how bad things seem to get, all of these things will come to an end. But the future we have in Christ will never end. Jesus has been born in Bethlehem, and for that reason, we can face all things. Christmas gives us a real hope, because Jesus has been born.