**“If I Have to Pull this Car Over…”**

Jeremiah 33:14-16

“Boys, if I have to pull this car over…” That’s what my dad used to say on long car trips. My brother and I would get bored, and eventually we would start fussing and fighting and yelling at each other. And that’s when my dad would say, “Boys, if I have to pull this car over…” Funny thing is Dad never had to finish that sentence. There was no need to. We knew what he meant, and we knew what would happen if he ever did pull the car over. There would be consequences. Now, there has been a time or two in my life as a parent when I have said to *my* kids, “If I have to pull this car over…” And just like my dad, I never had to finish that sentence either. They knew what I meant. There would be consequences.

But sometimes when my kids were very young, I would trick them. We would be driving along, and they would be talking to each other in a normal tone of voice. Out of the blue, I would rather sternly say, “If I have to pull this car over…” All talking would stop. They would sit up straight, and a look of confusion would come over their faces, wondering what they had done. Then I would say, “I’ll buy you ice cream!”

In our scripture reading from Jeremiah, God’s people are in exile. The Babylonians had conquered them and carried them off in chains as prisoners of war, apparently destined to live as slaves in Babylon forever. Just as the Old Testament prophets had warned, they were facing the consequences of their actions.

For centuries the Hebrew prophets had warned the people to change their ways. But the Hebrew prophets’ fiercest anger was directed at their king because the king had one primary purpose for his reign—to establish fair and equitable relationships among his people, to encourage and uphold right and respectful living throughout his kingdom so that all God’s people could live in safety.

But very few kings listened to the prophets and rarely did the people. The Hebrew prophets warned there would be consequences, but they didn’t listen. The prophet Amos said (and listen to how he says it), “Alas for you who desire the *day* of Lord…It is a *day* of darkness.” (Amos 5:18) And the prophet Zephaniah declared (and listen to how he says it), “The great *day* of the Lord is near!” He warned that it would be a *day* of “wrath and distress, ruin and devastation, darkness and gloom.” (Zeph 1:14-15) Traditionally in the writings of the Old Testament prophets, the Day of Lord was a day to be feared, a day of consequences.

That’s why when Jeremiah begins this passage by saying, “The *days* are surely coming…” I’ll bet the readers of this passage sat up straight and stopped talking. And a look of confusion may have come over their faces. “We’re already in exile,” they probably thought. “We’re already facing the consequences of our actions. How much worse can it get?”

But Jeremiah tricked them. Much to their delight, God says, “The days are surely coming…when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah…In those *days* Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety…In those *days*…I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David.”

Hundreds of years earlier, God made a promise to King David. His family tree, his royal dynasty would rule over Israel forever. And so it was until the people of Jerusalem were hauled off to Babylon in chains. And the assumption was they would never return. But out of that dead rotting royal family tree, God promised a sprout will grow—a righteous branch. And this righteous descendent of King David will establish justice. This Righteous King “will run the country honestly and fairly. He’ll set things right.” (*The Message)*

Advent is a season of longing and expectation for God to set things right. As Christians, we believe that Jesus, a descendent of David, is God’s Righteous Branch, the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy. As Christians, we believe Jesus has come to establish just and fair relationships— to set things right. And as a Christian Community, we are called to live our lives in obedience to our Righteous King.

I want to tell you a story from the history of the church I served in Kingsport, Tennessee. It’s a story from the early 1960s when God’s Righteous Branch came to this church, and the church decided to live obediently under his rule. It’s a story of a time when Jesus established just and right relationships in First Presbyterian Church in Kingsport.

I first heard this story when it was told by a woman named Leola Campbell. She was speaking in honor of her good friend Cora Cox. Leola told this story at the dedication of the Cora Cox Academy, a new school only a few blocks from my church in Kingsport. Now, in case you are not quite paying attention, please be aware that as I retell the story, I will be speaking in the first person. But I am retelling the story using Leola Campbell’s words of her experience, not mine. After all, in 1963, I was only 3 years old. Leola’s story begins:

“In the 1960s, God’s plan was being revealed in the world…At that time, most if not all churches were still segregated…[But] the walls of segregation were slowly coming down. Things were also changing for [St. James Presbyterian Church]. St. James was a very small church with an all-black congregation...We could no longer keep the doors open, and St. James’ closing was inevitable. We had to begin to look at other options for worship. We really had only two to choose from. Join another denomination or join an all-white Presbyterian congregation. At first, neither looked too favorable in our eyes, until Kirk Allen, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, came and extended a personal invitation to each family in our congregation to be a part of their church family.

Cora and I would discuss the unknowns of being the first black families to integrate the church. We wondered what would be our place—how we would fit in, how we would serve, and most importantly would we really be accepted by its members? After much prayer and the insisting of a persistent pastor who was determined to have us in his fold, in 1963 the Cox family and the Campbell family joined First Presbyterian Church.

All questions we had before we joined, we still had after we joined. What is our place? We had worked so hard at St. James, and this church was so big that if we just went to church on Sunday and went home after the service that wouldn’t be so bad, and we kind of looked forward to it. But of course, that was not in God’s framework either. [God] had other plans. And soon we both found our places of service there. Cora served in almost every capacity at First Pres., from Sunday School teacher to Elder, and she served faithfully until her passing. She left an indelible mark there, as she did throughout the community.

Now that is a remarkable story, isn’t it? Christ came and established right and fair relationships within this congregation. The walls of segregation were torn down, at least within this particular church. A white congregation extended a gracious invitation to a black congregation to join them in ministry, and they welcomed them into positions of leadership. And two black families had the courage to accept the invitation. Quick and easy, right?

Well, Leola graciously left out a few details. After Session voted to approve the Cox family and the Campbell family for membership, several members left the church. What really makes this story remarkable is that the Session knew there was resistance within the congregation. They knew there was a very real possibility of losing members. But believing that, as a Christian community, they were called to live their lives in obedience to their Righteous King, the Session voted unanimously to approve the Coxs and Campbells for membership, and the Coxs and Campbells courageously accepted. For “The Lord [was their] righteousness.” (vs. 16)

Advent is a season of longing and expectation for God to set things right. Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of God’s Righteous Branch who comes to establish just and fair relationships so that all God’s people live in safety. Perhaps it is only fair that I warn you not everyone wants the world to be set right. There will always be resistance to change. But, as Christians and as a Christian Community, we are called to live our lives in obedience to our Righteous King, for the consequence of following any other king only leads to exile.

And so, I pray in this season of Advent our prayer would be: “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus, come.”

Let us pray:

Lord, this year, empower us to claim the true meaning of Christmas. Prepare us to receive and follow our newborn king into your intended future and into your Kingdom of just and fair relationships.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Amen

David Cagle

November 28, 2021

1st Sunday of Advent