

Right now, at this very moment, what are you looking forward to the most? Some of you might say “Vacation.” Some might say “Retirement.” Other answers might include “Getting married.” “Graduating.” Quite a few might say “Christmas.” It is a human need to be looking forward to something, whether big or small. It keeps us moving forward in life and gives us a sense of purpose.

The Christian faith is very much forward focused. I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about it that way or not. But as we find meaning for our lives in Jesus Christ, we find a purpose that keeps us moving ahead. Now, today is the beginning of Advent and the beginning of a new Church Year, yet our gospel lesson wants us to take one more look at what Jesus said about the future. It’s virtually the same gospel lesson as last week, so if it sounds familiar, that may be why. All the features are there once more: catastrophes, signs of the end times appearing, and finally the Son of Man himself, King Jesus coming on a cloud with power and great glory. You may be wondering, why are we talking about this again? Let me say it this way: we are beginning with the end in mind; ‘the end’ meaning, Jesus is coming back. *This is something for Christians to look forward to.* The thought of it should make your heart jump for joy! When thinking about The End, it’s easy to get caught up in the scariness of the signs, to the degree that we forget what they signal: the arrival of Jesus our King, our Savior and Friend! The wait will finally be over. The reunion will begin.

The history of God dealing with His people has always had this forward focus. That forward focus started in the Garden of Eden itself, with the promise God made to send One who would crush the head of the serpent. That promise became sharper and more defined as it passed down through generations and people like Abraham and King David. What’s easy to forget is this promise advanced in the middle of great problems. That was the situation in today’s Old Testament reading, where we hear from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah had been selected by God to communicate His Word to His people, but that doesn’t mean it was happy work. Jeremiah lived at a time when people refused God’s message and resented His messengers. At least twice, people tried to kill Jeremiah for preaching the Word, so you might understand why he was filled with tension and is sometimes referred to as “The Weeping Prophet.” Then there’s his message. Jeremiah was called specifically to announce that Jerusalem was about to be conquered, her people enslaved by the Babylonians, and Solomon’s temple flattened because the people had so thoroughly rejected the God who had given them all those things.

But that’s not all Jeremiah was called to proclaim. The Holy Spirit also put these words in Jeremiah’s mouth: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 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. In those days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: The LORD is our righteousness.”

Can you imagine how much Jeremiah would've looked forward to that promise coming true? This is one of those promises that changes reality, right away. The same Jerusalem that would experience violence, bloodshed and enslavement would once again have security and enjoy prosperity. This great reversal would happen with the arrival of one, singular person, related to David, who would make things right in perfect justice. You and I are blessed to know how precisely Jesus fulfills the promise spoken by the prophet. But for Jeremiah, it was enough to know that beyond judgment, God was preparing grace for his people.

The same holds true for you and me. Whatever struggles you are facing, you can experience the grace God has prepared for you, because "The LORD is our righteousness." This isn't just a snappy little slogan Jeremiah throws in at the end. It's a declaration of how God works. It's a gospel message. It is news that changes reality. Here's what it means. Our righteousness—our right-ness—our good standing with God—is not a matter of our performance. What would it be like if it was? What if God gave you exactly what you deserved for everything? I can only speak for myself, but I know I would be completely lost and cast out. But that's not what Jeremiah said. The reality is that the LORD is our Righteousness. Jesus' perfect record is your perfect record. Jesus' death for sins is your death for sins. Jesus' resurrection is your resurrection, and all of it yours by faith in what He has done. The righteous Branch has become a tree of life, giving shelter and strength to all who come to him. God is preparing grace for his people, always. Because of who He is and what He does, there is always something better coming.

So here we are: December. The First Sunday in Advent. We're looking forward to Christmas carols and winter wonderlands and the baby in the manger, and I'm all for it, as long as we realize that Jesus' story doesn't stop in the stable. It continues on through His growth as a man, his life and teaching, his innocent suffering and death, his resurrection from the tomb, his ascension into heaven, and his return in glory!

For right now, at this moment, please, look forward to the opportunities created by Christmas. Notice the person who seems especially lonely, and approach them with an invitation. Notice the person who will not ask for help, but who really needs it, and find a way to graciously step in and serve. Don't turn away from the needs you see around you. Change the world for someone this Christmas. Just start with one person. Give them something to look forward to.