

### **Jeremiah 33:14-16**

1 Advent C Midweek + December 5, 2018  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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The Lord Our Righteousness

The Word of the Lord from Jeremiah 33:16: "In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Imagine, if you will, a woodsman in a faraway land who is entrusted with taking care of the king's forest. In the courtyard of the palace stands a noble fir. It is not that old or tall, but it is remarkable in form and strength and beauty. It is planted in memory of the king's daughter, and each day the king looks out from his room, admires the tree and remembers his little girl. One day, the king calls the woodsman into his presence and says, "I am leaving on a journey, and I will be gone for quite some time. I entrust the forest to your care as usual, and especially the noble fir in the courtyard. As long as it stands, I am pleased with you. As long as it stands, you have my blessing; but if it should fall, you will face my wrath. Guard it. Your very life depends upon it. When I return, I look forward to seeing that tree in all of its strength and beauty."

The king departs and the woodsman goes about his work, caring especially for the tree in the courtyard. But one night as he sleeps, enemies creep in; and by the time the alarm is raised the enemies are gone and the noble fir lies on its side, felled by a few blows of an axe and set ablaze with pitch and tar for good measure.

What is the woodsman to do? His life depends upon the tree, and the tree is no more. All that is left is the stump in the ground, a testament of violence rather than an object of beauty. The king has given his word; and when he returns, the woodsman will pay with his life.

The woodsman lives in fear, knowing that any day the trumpets could sound the king's arrival. He is sickened and failing, and he dares not even look at the stump in the courtyard. There is nothing he can do to bring it back, nothing to satisfy the wrath of the king.

The trumpets sound – the king arrives! His party rides into the courtyard and all goes quiet. Soon enough, the woodsman is summoned before his king, where he kneels to await his sentence. The king speaks: he says, "I have heard what has happened. I gave you my command, and you have failed me." There's a pause, and then the king says, "Look at the tree." Though he does not want to lift his eyes an inch for fear of what he'll see, the woodsman drags his vision to the stump. The stump is not quite dead: a branch is shooting up from it, one stick with a few twigs festooned with green needles. It's a far cry from what the tree used to be: it's almost a mockery of what the tree used to be.

Not so for the king, though. He declares, "My daughter was merciful, and I am merciful too. I see the branch shooting up from the stump: it is not what I desired, but life remains. It is not the tree it once was, but I count this branch as the tree. The noble fir still lives; and so, my woodsman, so will you."

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"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," He says, "I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." A

righteous branch will spring up, declares the Lord, just as He says of Christ elsewhere in Isaiah 11, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit."

God chose Israel as His people and gave them all that they had. They were to be a tree standing tall. He gave them His Law – not so that they might earn His love, but so that they would not turn to sin and so reject His love. You know the story all too well: the people of Israel rejected the Lord for false gods and favored sins. Because they wanted their false gods, the Lord entrusted them to the care of their idols of rock and wood. Fake gods are no match for swords, though, and the twelve tribes were destroyed by the armies of Assyria and Babylon. The great "tree" that was the kingdom of David was hacked to a stump; and almost always in history, nations reduced to a stump disappear from history and are forgotten.

But the Lord is merciful and true to His Word, and He had promised that the Savior would be born among the descendants of David. So in the fullness of time, miraculously in many ways, a branch shot forth from the stump – a righteous branch, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was not born to re-establish a kingdom of David for some on earth, but to open the kingdom of heaven. Behold how He did it: the righteous branch sprang up, only to be chopped down at the cross for the sins of the world. But then He rose up again, to open the kingdom of heaven to all who are righteous.

"All who are righteous:" who would that be? There is no one righteous, not even one, says Paul in Roman 3 as he quotes from the psalms. If only those who live without sin are going to be in heaven, it's going to be a very quiet, empty place. This isn't a matter of being better or good or good enough. This is about being righteous, being holy. The standard God sets is "pure and perfect," not merely "above average." If you take God's Law seriously and believe it to be true, that leaves you kneeling in the dust without hope against His wrath. If you don't take God's Law seriously, you're still left kneeling in the dust without hope against His wrath; but you simply haven't come to terms with that yet. The Law of God is clear: unless you're righteous, you have no hope of the kingdom of heaven.

Ah, but our text continues: "In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"

The LORD is our righteousness. That's how you are righteous before God: God looks upon you and says, "You are not what I created you to be: you are far from pure and holy. You are not righteous. But when I look upon you, I don't see you and your sin: I see My Son and His righteousness, because My Son has robed you in His righteousness. If I saw you alone, I would only see death; but My Son lives, and for His sake I declare that you are alive."

The Lord is your righteousness: that's your hope, your confidence. And never forget why the Lord is your righteousness: the Lord is your righteousness because He became your sin. That's the shocking proclamation of 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." When God looked upon His Son at the cross, He saw you and your sin and judged Him for it. So when God looks upon you, He sees His Son and delights in you.

That's why you lift your eyes and look to the tree planted on Calvary, to the Son of God who is chopped down there so that He might rise again. That's why you repent of your sin and flee from it: sin itself is bad enough, but for you to continue in sin is to hold onto what Jesus died to cleanse you from. It is to reject the sacrifice He has made and to invite God to see your sin when He looks upon you. No, repent and live as one set free from sin, lest God look upon you and see sin once again.

That's why you are always sure to make Christianity about Christ and not about you. Christianity is not about saying, "Now that Jesus has died for me, let me show God what I can become!" Christianity

is all about clinging to Christ and counting Him as your righteousness, even as all sorts of enemies seek to break your grasp and get you to trust in yourself.

And that's why you treasure the means of grace. There is nothing more priceless than your baptism, because that's where Jesus joined you to His death and resurrection. That's where He traded your sin for His righteousness. It was at your baptism that God declared for the first time, "When I look at you, I see My Son." It's by His Word that He keeps you trusting in Jesus, keeps clothing you in His righteousness by taking away your sins. It's by His Supper that He feeds you His Son's body and blood, that you might be strengthened in Christ all the more.

The Lord is our righteousness. That's a summary of the Christian faith. You're not righteous, but Jesus is – and He puts His righteousness upon you as He has taken away your sin. In these dark days in a dying world, that is your hope: heaven is yours because Jesus is your righteousness. And if Jesus is your righteousness, then there is no doubt that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen