

**The Hidden Christmas Story**  
**1. Promise of a Messiah**  
**Jeremiah 33:14-18**

**ADVENT 1**  
**December 1, 2019**

**Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards**

The Advent Sundays preceding Christmas are.  
 for me, the opportune time in the church  
 liturgical year to be introspective – even  
 more than Lent.

Since my unexpected illness and life-threatening  
 surgery last July, I have been anticipating  
 this final Christmas season with you.

Last year's season was supposed to be my last,  
 however, a few persuasive voices convinced me  
 to forgo retirement for another six months.

I am truly thankful to have this extra time  
 with you.

I hope this Christmas cycle of Advent, Christmas Eve,  
 and Epiphany services will be meaningful  
 and memorable.

Over the past three decades,  
 have you noticed how festive public activities  
 and the media productions relating to Christmas  
 either avoid or are void of its Judeo –  
 Christmas origins?

Starting with Thanksgiving the background music  
 in restaurants and stores seem to have  
 abandoned “Joy to the World” for  
 “Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas.”

Christ is not part of the Christmas  
 our contemporary culture celebrates.

Indeed, Christmas is no longer a holy day  
 but a holiday – at time for family,  
 for giving, for finding romance, and  
 for achieving that elusive peace on earth.

Because of its year-end commercial indispensability,  
 Christmas has become a secular sales event.

My fear is that its true religious roots and  
 original meaning will become more and more  
 obscure to most people born in this century.

Every year at Christmas,  
 the more I read the Nativity stories in  
 Matthew and Luke, each sentence and

each word glimmers with significance with allusions to Jewish prophets and family histories, with connections to other words and stories in the Gospels. and with multiple meanings for the present – about birth and death, youth and aging, promise and fulfillment, hope and salvation.

Each time I turn to these texts,  
I see something new; each time I reread  
these sacred scriptural passages,  
they still speak to me.

Knowing the back story of the Nativity of Jesus Christ also helps as to realize that Christmas is much more than a holiday made for children.

Unfortunately, when people come to accept the mythical nature of Santa Claus, they begin to apply the same agnostic logic to the biblical birth stories of Jesus – that angelic appearances, prescient dreams, immaculate conception, and a guiding star, are also superstitious nonsense.

Thus, they dismiss the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke, they relegate the Advent message to a space next to the Elf on the Shelf, and reduce key biblical personages into sentimental figures in a lighted creche scene.

The backstory or The Hidden Christmas Story as told through this year's Narrative Lectionary readings begin in all places – a prison, where the prophet Jeremiah is confined.

At the outset of the 33<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, it reads: “The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was still confined in the court of the guard (33:1).

This passage of Jeremiah lies within a section of the book known as *The Little Book of Consolation* (chs. 31-33), since its primary theme is encouragement and hope in the midst of horrible catastrophe and despair.

Jeremiah wrote the longest of all the sixteen

Old Testament prophetic books.

He is considered one of the four major prophets along with Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

A recent online quiz on the Bible posed the question, “What book in the Bible contains the most words?”

A trick question, because most people would consider the 150 psalms of the Psalter as containing the most words.

The answer is Jeremiah, which is the longest book with a total of 21,673 words edging out Genesis, Psalms, Ezekiel and Isaiah.

Jeremiah was sent by God to preach to Judah, the southern kingdom, during the reign of Josiah in the final decades of the seventh century and the opening years of the sixth century B.C.

The precise meaning of the name Jeremiah is unknown, but some suggestions include “Yahweh founded,” “Yahweh exalts,” or “Yahweh throws down.”

Jeremiah also reveals much about his emotions and reactions throughout his writings.

For this reason, he has earned the nickname “the weeping prophet.”

It is no wonder because Jeremiah complained that he was too young when he was called to be a prophet, but God assured him of his own divine presence and help.

He was later directed by God not to marry, for this was to be part of his symbolic message to Judah (16:1-4).

This was followed by instructions that he must not attend any funerals of his loved ones or the people of his hometown village of Anathoth, as a reminder that God has removed his comfort from them, and neither was he to attend any feasts, because God wanted to remove their rejoicing (16:4-5).

Talk about not having a life!

Jeremiah’s unsociability and unavailability set him apart from those around him and set him up for the unpopular message he would be called upon to deliver.

We meet Jeremiah this Advent season

during a period of waiting in the darkness,  
 Advent for Christians is a season for  
 feeling out of kilter, so to speak.  
 It is a season in which we are caught up  
 between joyful expectation and the harsh  
 realities of the present condition while  
 we await the promise to be fulfilled.  
 And the spiritual atmosphere and discipline of  
 this season puts the church at odds with  
 today's culture in which the holiday season  
 is replete with bright lights and celebrations  
 and packages wrapped in gold and tied  
 neatly with bows.  
 There is no room for darkness and little patience  
 for prayerful meditations and expectation  
 when holiday music is pouring out every  
 speaker and the neighborhood is glowing  
 with diverse displays of lights.  
 Yet ironically, this experience of being  
 out of sync with our surroundings  
 may enable us to be more deeply attuned to  
 the nature of Advent.  
 For in Advent, we live in the unsettling tension  
 between what is and what will be.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks from prison to  
 a community that is acutely aware of this tension.  
 Jerusalem has been completely devastated in the  
 Babylonian invasion of 587 B.C. and its  
 inhabitants have been turned out of their homes;  
 some carted off into Babylonian exile and captivity,  
 while many others wandered around as refugees.  
 For those living in exile, their way of life has been  
 completely overturned.  
 Their sense of security has been violated.  
 They have no idea if they will live to see  
 their homeland again.  
 And this experience causes them to question:  
 Where is God in the midst of all of this?  
 Why did God let such devastation to happen?  
 Will God be present with them in exile?  
 What happened to the covenant with David  
 and God's faithfulness?  
 Is the grace of the covenant promises made  
 long ago still operational for this generation  
 and the ones to follow?

The experience of exile for the ancient Jews  
 like their 20<sup>th</sup> century ordeal of Holocaust  
 is one of profound dissonance and despair.  
 Their lives and their world as they have lived and  
 known it has been turned topsy turvy.  
 The harshness and hardship of their present reality  
 makes God and God's covenant promises  
 seem far from reach and recovery.  
 The psalmist laments: "By the rivers of Babylon –  
 there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion."  
 Still in spite of all things, Jeremiah offers a  
 vision of a new reality: "The days are coming,  
 declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the good  
 promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.  
 In those days and at that time I will make a  
 righteous branch sprout from David's line;  
 he will do what is just and right in the land.  
 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem  
 will live in safety. This is the name by which  
 it will be called: The LORD our righteous Savior"(33:14-16).

We should not underestimate what a daring,  
 outrageous proclamation this is.  
 In the face of death and destruction,  
 with all evidence to the contrary,  
 Jeremiah insists that God's promises are certain.  
 The sign of this covenant promise is the  
 righteous branch of David.  
 For the Sundays of Advent our bulletin covers  
 will display this symbol.  
 It stands for the promise or restoration of the  
 Davidic monarchy and the Levitical priesthood,  
 The covenant with David that promises are eternal  
 kingship and God's perpetual love remains reliable.

Jeremiah's oracle images an alternative reality:  
 the restoration of Israel, the practice of justice  
 and righteousness, and flourishing life in  
 the land that God has promised.  
 Jeremiah's prophecy once again shows that  
 God is faithful, even when people aren't  
 faithful to God.  
 God will promise a savior, and that promise  
 springs forth in the symbolism and imagery  
 of Jeremiah's "Righteous Branch."  
 In this time between the times, this Advent  
 we await the once-awaited Savior to  
 come again to fulfill his promise of

eternal life in God's kingdom.

So, beloved people of God,  
remember this, God never promised that  
our lives would be pain and hassle-free.  
God didn't promise that if we work hard enough  
and live righteously free from sin,  
that we would be rewarded here and now.  
God did promise that in whatever happens  
God will walk with us and offer us  
hope, courage, and strength to get  
through dark and difficult times.  
Hold the promise and the image of Jeremiah's  
righteous branch to lead to our Savior,  
Jesus Christ this Advent season. Amen