

Sermon: The Days Are Surely Coming

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Nestled in the vast mountain range of the Rockies, in British Columbia, the mighty Fraser River gushes south then westward to its destiny with the Pacific, via the Strait of Georgia, just south of the City of Vancouver. At one stage of that long journey, the mountains tighten and gather to form a deep narrow canyon, through which the river must pass. It does so in a thunderous fashion, flooding its way onto a deep riverbed before spilling into a wide valley, taking it outward to the ocean.

Witnessing such a force of nature, one cannot help but come to an appreciation, not of the natural variety, but of a spiritual reality that: confinement can empower. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his cell at Tegel, Nelson Mandela in his cell at Robben Island, Martin Luther King Jr in the Birmingham Prison—they and countless others had witnessed to this reality, that confinement empowers.

In the Lectionary readings today, Jeremiah spoke from confinement. His prophetic ministry was always distrusted and opposed by false prophets and kings of Judah alike. David the psalmist spoke from an experience of opposition, that he knew all too well on his way to the throne. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, had experienced confinement in the not too distant past. Jesus, thought not in our reading today but certainly included in the Lectionary, spoke in Luke 21, with an urgent sense of impending confinement. All were empowered and moved to deep spiritual insights.

The contemporary men and women of North America are no strangers to confinement. Flanked by two oceans, (three if you count the Arctic Sea), and shielded by the technological and military might of the United States, we should feel secure but we do not. We are fearful of the barbarians at the gate, so we erect fences, walls or militarize our border security. We are, at times, fearful of those who seemingly hate our value, and at other times, fearful of those who envy our ways of life; and we cannot decide which one is more to fear.

We think we have created a just society from within. Now here is a harsh reality: it is anything but. In this country, to be Indigenous is for many to feel resentment—even rage—against the colonial power which has paid

lip-service to healing and reconciliation that falls far short of real actions to right the generational harms done to not just the previous but the current generation. To be Black is to realize the hopes and dreams envisioned during the Civil Rights movement are still just hopes and dreams; and that one is still confined to the need to have that painful 'talk' with one's children, to never disobey a police order. To be an immigrant to is to realize that all one's schooling, previous work experience, or professional know-how are counted as nil in the shadow of the mighty 'Canadian experience', and that one is confined figuratively to start from scratch, with the hope that one's children may someday make it. To be the white dominant class entails a different type of confinement, of layer upon layers of imposed guilt, to be forced to acknowledge privilege even when one feels anything but; even as one watches the traditional way of life slipping away day by day. I haven't even begun to mention the confinement felt by being a Palestinian, a Jew, a modern sex-slave, or a migrant worker...the list goes on.

As Herbert O'Driscoll, a highly regarded Canadian Anglican priest and preacher, noted in the *Christian Century* magazine, "Empires, nations, cities, congregations, individual lives, all face the limitations that can defeat dreams but can also—and this is the truth in these scriptures—make possible much achievement. Confinement can send the mind and the heart on journeys toward the most distant horizons."

Jeremiah lived in a nation on the brink of total collapse and total defeat. His own people had vehemently rejected his prophetic ministry. Yet even in physical confinement, he continues to preach, continues to envision a future of a transformed society. He even bought a piece of land and buried its title deed when most others were busy fleeing the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah speaks of the coming days, that the Lord shall fulfill the promise, that a righteous Branch shall spring forth from the house of David, that the land will be saved, that the people will live in safety, and the name that shall be proclaimed: Jehovah *Tsedeqnu*, or "The Lord is our righteousness."

David, the psalmist king, speaks of trusting in the Lord. "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust." He was not besieged by the realization of the existence of enemies, personal or professional. He was not weary, nor anxious; he did not lash out nor do harm to others, all in the name of self-preservation. David turns towards God, whose path is right, whose teaching is sure, whose love is steadfast, whose covenant is

secure. To such God who will never put him to shame, David declares, “in you I trust”.

The Apostle Paul, must have wondered if it was at all worth it. Rejection, opposition and persecution followed his missionary journey. Shipwrecked, impoverishment, imprisonment, he faced them all. What was worse, the communities of faith he painstakingly nurtured, were often at each other’s throats, over sometimes trivial issues of pride, of outdated customs, of whom to follow.

Yet the knowledge that there were also good people, genuine in their faith, who respond to care with an enthusiastic care for others, who were willing to organize into community of faith, love and hope in Jesus Christ—makes all the difference.

So he carries on. To the church gathered in Thessalonica, he writes with such joy and affection, in 1 Thessalonians 3:9, “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.”

Paul isn’t bitter because the church was not able to provide for him financially. He simply got down with them, labour and toiled night and day, worked to earn a keep so that the good news of Jesus can continued to be proclaimed. Biblical scholars are not sure if Paul made tents there, as he did in the city of Corinth, but the spirit of his tent-making way is still practiced even today, as a viable model of Christian ministry.

Most importantly, Paul blesses the Thessalonians unreservedly, “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

This coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints, remains to be the reason why we hope today. In a time when politicians and pundits alike are playing their usual role as harbinger of doom, forcing us to confront the painful reality of 25% tariff soon to be imposed by the U.S. government, of closed and militarized boarder, of the rumbling of barbarians in distant land soon to be at our gate, we the communities of faith in Jesus Christ remain faithful and hopeful.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we proclaim in faith that Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. We remain hopeful that the days are surely coming, when kingdom reality will

finally trump all earthly powers and principalities. We remain hopeful that justice will one day roll on like a river (just as the mighty Fraser), and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). We remain hopeful knowing that hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:5).

Allow me to conclude my reflection today, with this story I came across in Our Daily Bread (May 7, 1992): During the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century, German pastor Paul Gerhardt and his family were forced to flee from their home. One night as they stayed in a small village inn, homeless and afraid, his wife broke down and cried openly in despair. To comfort her, Gerhardt reminded her of Scriptural promises about God's provision and keeping. Then, going out to the garden to be alone, he too broke down and wept, as he had come to his darkest hour.

Soon afterward, Gerhardt felt the burden lifted and sensed anew the Lord's presence. Taking his pen, he wrote a hymn that has brought comfort to many.

"Give to the winds thy fears;
hope, and be undismayed;
God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears;
God shall lift up thy head.
Through waves and clouds and storms
He gently clears the way.
Wait thou His time, so shall the night
soon end in joyous day."

It is often in our darkest hours that the presence of God is made known most clearly. God uses our sufferings and troubles to show us that the Lord is our only source of strength.

So take heart! Place yourself in God's hands. Hope in God, and wait upon the Lord. And may the Lord God bless you also with a 'song in the night' that ends in a joyous day.

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