

“The Light Ahead”

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¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In 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. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.” (Jeremiah 33:14-16)

I have to confess that I don't remember much about driver's ed. One thing I do remember is the high and tight flattop haircut of my instructor, Coach Joyce. As his title suggests, driving instruction was a side hustle for him; his main passion was being the offensive line coach for our high school football team, which, I might add, won a state 4A championship the year after he taught me the art of a gliding stop and the three-point turn. I also remember the secondary brake pedal that was installed on the passenger side of our training car, and the time Coach Joyce enthusiastically engaged it the first time I sped up to try and get through a yellow light.

But there is at least one piece of actual driving knowledge that I have held onto to these many years, and it is something Coach Joyce taught me about steering. “When you are on the highway,” he said, “don't look at the lines right in front of the car. Set your eyes way out in front, toward the horizon.” The science behind his lesson is that, if we keep our eyes on the road right in front of us, we focus our attention on things that are too close, and we end up over-correcting and over-steering to stay on the road. That is especially true at night, when we are relying heavily on our headlights. However, if we can adjust our gaze a little farther down the road, it becomes much easier to keep the car on a path that is smooth and straight.

That memory popped into my mind this week because Jeremiah was basically teaching that very same lesson to God's people. A little overview of the book of Jeremiah will help us see this. The prophet Jeremiah lived in the area around Jerusalem during the tumultuous years when the Assyrian Empire was fading and Babylon was beginning to rise up as the next great conqueror. A small player on the international stage, Israel was perpetually caught in the middle between the military strength of Egypt to the south and whatever major power was brewing to the East. But in Jeremiah's early years things had gone pretty well, and a wave of nationalism had swept across Israel. The most popular prophets were the ones who told the people what they wanted to hear. “Don't worry about those Babylonians,” they said. “We are stronger than they are. We are more faithful than they are. We are better than they are. We are fine. Things will be fine.”

Jeremiah was one of the few prophets of his day who saw things as they really were and said what really needed to be said. He knew Jerusalem would never be able to stand up to Babylon. Conquest, he believed, was inevitable. There was about to be a big shakeup, and things were about to get really bad and really dark. As a result, he was not a very popular guy, especially with the power players of the day. They preferred the prophets who would tell them happy stories, not the guy who was always preaching gloom and doom. A true prophet in that era had a difficult and lonely calling, and Jeremiah once felt so low that he wished he had never been born. For all of these reasons, Jeremiah has sometimes been called



“the weeping prophet.”

Even so, there is no prophet that I respect more, and I will tell you why. Jeremiah spoke truth, even when it was hard to speak the truth. Jeremiah stood up to kings and queens, even when it was mortally dangerous to do so. Jeremiah felt deeply and passionately and took things that happened to him personally, but that was because he was so invested in his community. If others were in danger, he was in danger. If they felt pain, he felt pain. He knew that the people of God would rise or fall together, win or lose together.

But I think the very best aspect of Jeremiah was that his pessimism – which was really just realism – was always tethered to a steadfast faith that things would get better... a time when the sun would rise again... that there would come a time when God would set things right... and, to quote Robert Browning, all would be “right with the world.” So, even when surrounded by angry tyrants, foreboding threats, and deepening darkness all around, Jeremiah always had his eyes set on the horizon, looking for the light ahead.

The core of Jeremiah’s vision of hope appears chapters 30 to 33, which is often called the “Little Book of Comfort.” And that vision culminates with a reaffirmed promise of a coming Messiah, the anointed one of God. The Word Jeremiah received from God was this: *“The days are surely coming... 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,” God continues, *“I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”*

In the coming Babylonian conquest, things looked bleak for the line of Davidic kings in Israel. It was almost certain that David’s line would be cut off and left as a rotting stump. But Jeremiah’s prophecy was that one fragile branch would survive. And that branch would be unlike any that had come before.

The word Jeremiah uses to describe it is *tsedhâqâh* (צִדְקָה), which means “righteous.” When we hear that word, we think first of moral and ethical purity, and it certainly means that. But, in Hebrew, the word *tsedhâqâh* also suggests something that is “straight, right or true,” in the same way that an arrow must be straight, right and true. If an arrow is crooked, it will not fly correctly, and it will most likely miss the target. Only when an arrow is true will it’s flight also be true.¹ So, the Messiah that God has promised will not only be just and morally pure, but he will also be a straight shooter. His ways will not be crooked, or gnarled or twisted. The goodness you see will be the goodness you get.

That hope kept Jeremiah going through some very tough and lonely times. His prayer was the prayer of the psalmist who wrote *“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!...I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.”*² Even in the midst of crooked and twisted times, Jeremiah saw someone coming who would be straight and true. Even in the midst of darkness, Jeremiah could always see the light ahead.

A little over a week ago the church lost an amazing preacher, author, and teacher. The only time I heard Tony Campolo in person was in October of 1989, at a conference near Asheville, NC. I was nineteen years old, but I can still remember so many of the stories and powerful messages he shared with us. I didn’t know it at the time, but that weekend changed my life. And one of the stories I remember best is the one he used for his big finish.

He told us that once a year his home church would hold what they called a “preach off.”

¹ "Hebrew Thoughts" on Strong's #6663/#6666 (Tsedeqah) <http://new.studyLight.org/ls/ht/index.cgi?a=554>

² Psalm 130:1, 5-6.

It was exactly what it sounded like – they got five or six preachers to come in and give back-to-back sermons to see who is best. They never said that – they said it was “for the glory of God” – but they knew what it was. One year Tony was one of those preachers. “And I don’t want to brag,” he said to us, “but I was good.”

When he sat down, his pastor sitting next to him patted Tony on the back and said, “You did alright.”

“You’re next pastor,” Campolo answered. “You think you can top that?”

The pastor chuckled and said, “Son, sit back, cuz the old man is about to do you in!”

And that pastor did. For the next half hour, he did everybody in.

[That’s right. I said a half hour, and that was just one of six sermons. But I digress...]

That preacher did everyone in, and Campolo said he did it with one line. “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s comin’.”

“It’s Friday... and Jesus is dead on a cross. But it’s only Friday; Sunday’s coming!”

“It’s Friday... Pilate’s strutting around washing his hands ‘cause he thinks he’s won. But it’s only Friday; Sunday’s coming!”

“It’s Friday... and people are saying “the world is what it is – you can’t change anything in this world. But it’s only Friday; Sunday’s coming!”

It was an Easter message, but it is not just an Easter message. It is a message for anyone, at any time, who feels the darkness close at hand, who is struggling to believe that good things are ahead... people like Jeremiah, who was hunted, hated, misunderstood, and alone, but still kept a hopeful eye on the horizon, waiting for the light that surely lay ahead.

This Advent, may God grant us that kind of faith, and that kind of hope.

Amen.