

The reading from Jeremiah comes from a section called “The Book of Hope,” so-called because it’s embedded in much darker material. It’s a dark time for Jeremiah and the people of Judah. Jeremiah had been born in the time of good King Josiah, the king who discovered too late that they’d been disobeying the law and were going to be destroyed, and who committed to living by the law anyway.

Now Jeremiah is an adult, imprisoned by the current king, Zedekiah, who did not like hearing Jeremiah’s pessimistic prophecies. The Babylonians have attacked, and Jerusalem has been under siege for a full year. They have expended most of their resources. Earlier in Chapter 33 we learn that all the beautiful buildings of the city have been torn down to create rubble that will slow down the Babylonians progress. Dead bodies lie in the streets. There is nothing glorious left in Jerusalem, except perhaps the Temple. And the Temple is not going to protect the Judeans. In less than a year the Temple itself will be torn down and the exile of Judah will begin in earnest. But for the moment, King Zedekiah and his favored prophets can still kid themselves that disaster can be averted and that things will soon go back to normal.

With unspeakable catastrophe still unfolding, God gives Jeremiah this amazing vision, the last bit of which we just heard. The earlier part promises restoration of the fortunes of Judah and of Israel, and complete rebuilding. Once again will be heard the joyous voices of a wedding celebration; once more shepherds will occupy themselves with the peaceful, ordinary duties of a good day, counting their sheep as each passes under their hands. And then today’s reading, promising a righteous Branch, or good king, and worthy priests to operate the Temple as it should be.

It is not a small vision, not a commitment to incremental steps, but a gorgeous,

expansive vision of the kingdom as God intended it to be.

But it's odd. Nobody who hears Jeremiah's vision will live to see it fulfilled. What life holds for the people of his generation is deepening disaster. Under siege, residents of the city will starve and sicken. After a year the city will fall, and the survivors will be herded out, not knowing when or if they'll ever return. They'll face the greatest theological crisis yet, with the apparent military defeat of their God by the Babylonian gods, and they'll be baffled about how, if at all, their God will be present to them in a foreign land and without the Temple. Why does God give this vision to Jeremiah, to proclaim hope to people for whom the hope will never blossom into reality?

I think it is because the next generation needed to know what had been lost *and* how outrageous yet completely trustworthy God's promise was. There is implicit value in the story itself, and how it informs our sense of who we are and to whom we belong. It is tragic that Jeremiah's generation did not live to see the return, and actually that every generation since has still been waiting for the good king and the good priests. But the story keeps us grounded.

Here's what makes me think that, if you think I'm being hopelessly Pollyannaish. From this very fascinating book called *Sacred Liberty: America's Long, Bloody, and Ongoing Struggle for Religious Freedom*, a chapter about changing attitudes toward Jews in the 20th century. The author, Steven Waldman, tells of a German torpedo striking the *SS Dorchester* on Feb. 3, 1943. It blew a hole below the waterline, killing many American soldiers instantly. Some were asphyxiated by ammonia gas; some drowned; some were crushed under bunk beds that collapsed.

But hundreds survived the initial blast and scrambled up to the deck. There were the

ship's four chaplains, one Catholic, two Protestant, and one Jewish. Panic was on the verge of killing as many soldiers as the torpedo had. Some jumped overboard and were torn apart by the ship's propeller. One became so distressed that he tried to choke one of the chaplains. Others refused to leave the ship. The chaplains calmly ushered them one by one into the lifeboats. "So long, boys, good luck," one of the chaplains shouted from the dock as the last of the lifeboats drifted away, according to eyewitnesses.

One man couldn't get a life jacket on because of an injured shoulder. Rabbi Goode pulled the laces from his boots and tied the life preserver to the man's arm. The chaplains helped him over the side of the ship and into the water. When the life jackets ran out, the chaplains offered theirs.

As the *Dorchester* began to sink, the four chaplains could be heard praying separately—together—in English, Latin, and Hebrew. Rabbi Goode chanted the Sh'ma: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

One survivor, John Ladd, said the chaplains were still standing arm in arm as the ship disappeared beneath the waves, just 27 minutes after the torpedo hit. "It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven," he said.ⁱ

Those chaplains knew they were going to die. They did not know whether anyone would survive the shipwreck, and they certainly did not know who would win the war. The story only got worse for them. But by standing together and praying and helping people get their life jackets on so they'd have a chance of surviving, those four chaplains framed the situation as being within the providence of God. That means that although terrible things do happen, they do not foreclose or define the future. Terrible things cannot thwart the will of

God forever, or keep God from redeeming our realities.

The memory of the chaplains' calm and courage obviously meant a lot to the men who hit the water that day. For them to pray aloud and hand out life jackets was to claim that there *was* a future, a future worth living into. They did not need to be a part of that future to know that it was worth it for others to live into. I have to think that was a blessing to the survivors, sort of an implicit permission to live and thrive despite the chaplains' own deaths. They represented a bridge, the continuity of God's presence from an uneventful voyage to catastrophe to the next thing, whatever that might be. They represented the kind of vision Jeremiah had, that allowed the next generation, as yet unborn, to hold both the reality of tragedy *and* the reality of God's promise at the same time.

We begin Advent as always in what seems like the darkest of times. And we feel helpless to effect the change that's necessary even to stop the chaos, let alone restore peace and abundance. But the chaplains on the *Dorchester*, unable to reverse the catastrophe, still *knew* that God's providence was larger than the disaster, and so were able to equip their charges with the grace and hope to move forward. We should not underestimate the impact of the single candle we carry to light the darkness, and we should never underestimate the power of God to redeem what we thought was hopelessly lost.

God of the promised Messiah, as we wait for the fulfillment of your promise, we watch, we listen, and we open our hearts for your Word. Show us signs of your presence: a light in the darkness, a voice in the silence, and a stirring deep within us. Amen.

ⁱ *Sacred Liberty* by Steven Waldman. New York: HarperCollins, 2019. Pp 178-179