

## **“The Faintest Wick”**

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Text: Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16, Luke 21: 7-11, 25-28

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The story of the migrant caravan from Honduras to the USA is heartbreaking, but also incredible. How much despair do parents have to feel about their homeland to prompt them to take their children on a 4,000 km walk? To face the additional obstacles of having little or no food, sleeping outdoors. To face the uncertainty whether they will even be admitted to the USA. Despair may push you to leave, but what draws them forward? Hope. History is filled with stories of despair, but also hope. Hope keeps us moving forward through the dark times. But what can give credibility to hope?

Jeremiah struggled with despair. There he was, with the rest of Jerusalem, holed up within the city walls, surrounded by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. Things did not look good. Speaking for God Jeremiah told King Zedekiah, "Behold, I am about to give this city into the hands of the King of Babylon, and Zedekiah king of Judah will not escape." Well, that kind of talk is not good for morale, so Zedekiah threw Jeremiah into prison. There he sat: unable to encourage any change in God's people, unable to do anything for himself, other than wait for the inevitable: conquest by the Babylonians. The situation was desperate for everyone. But into that despair Jeremiah had a word from the Lord, that a descendant of David would one day reign as king, and his reign would be eternal. "I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." The inevitable happened: the city was conquered, the walls torn down, the temple destroyed, and thousands of Judeans were hauled off into captivity. But Jeremiah shared another promise of God: Jerusalem would be restored. "Behold, the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made". Hope can burn from the faintest wick...and it did for this captive people. 50 years later they were freed to rebuild Jerusalem, its walls and temple. The people rejoiced, and that promise fulfilled has sustained the Jews through the many desperate challenges they have faced since then. And 500 years later Jewish crowds called Jesus the son of David...and the world saw the glory of God through the cross and resurrection. And we rejoice, for this promise fulfilled sustains us. We rejoice, for even in the worst captivity hope can give freedom.

Jesus had been teaching about the unfolding reign of God, the end of the current age and of the age to come that was to be inaugurated by his return: the second coming. So he was naturally asked, "Teacher, when will this be and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" Jesus talked about signs: that there will be wars and rumours of war, great earthquakes, famines, plagues, the persecution of Christians. "People will faint from fear and foreboding" he said. "But then they will see the son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." These passages have made Christians anxious down through the ages because many have anticipated that the end of this age will come with a mountain of despair.

Many Christians have looked at these signs, comparing them to current events, and have shouted to the world "the time is near!" For example, Edgar Whisenant (a retired NASA engineer) predicted that Jesus would return in September 1988. He said, "Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong." His book, *88 Reasons Why The Rapture Will Be In 1988*, sold 4.5 million copies. As the date approached some Christian TV stations gave instructions for how to be prepared for Jesus' return. But like all other predictions before and since the expected moment did not arrive. I bought one of those books....a week after the anticipated day. I asked the sales clerk in a Christian bookstore in Victoria if they had a copy. The clerk, sheepishly, said, "Ahh, yes, in the back room." The clerk made me pay full price.

We always live in Advent, for as we say in the Apostles' Creed: we believe that Jesus will come again. So what do we make of these signs of Jesus' return? Rather than being signs pointing to a specific moment, these are events that happen all the time. There are always wars and rumours of war. Just this past week great earthquakes happened in Iraq, Vanuatu, Liberia and Taiwan. Outbreaks of disease take place all the time, such as the new Ebola crisis in Congo. Famines, like the one in Yemen, are sadly too frequent. In such devastating crises people are overwhelmed, devastated, feeling helpless. Despair. Jesus, in these teachings, is saying to us "when you endure war, famine, outbreaks, calamities, remember this: I am coming again. And such things will not happen in the age to come." Jesus' promise to us. Hope can burn from the faintest wick. And when people of faith hold on to this promise from Jesus they find they can weather the present storm, knowing that in the days to come things will be better, that Jesus stands with them in their suffering, and ultimately that these tragedies that paralyze us will pass.

Asia Bibi is a Christian and part of the tiny Christian minority of Pakistan. She is poor, a wife, the mother of five, uneducated and was a farm labourer. One day she went to fetch a jug of water for her and the Muslim women she worked beside. She took a sip from the jug and then passed it on to the other women, and started a furor in Pakistan. She was charged with blasphemy because this "unclean" Christian dared to share a drinking vessel with Muslims and refused to convert to Islam. She is a Christian. She was convicted, sentenced to death, and confined to death row as her case moved through the appeal process. Like the Jews facing their city's annihilation by the Babylonians and people enduring wars, earthquakes, storms and upheavals, what her future held seemed inevitable: death by hanging. She languished in solitary confinement for 9 years. Two politicians who spoke in her defense were killed. Rallies against her took place in the streets. She received death threats even while she sat in her jail cell. But still Asia and her family had hope. Six weeks ago her daughter Eisham said, "I will be very happy the day my mother will be released. I will hug her and will cry meeting her and will thank God that he has got her release." The Supreme Court in Pakistan a few days ago found in Asia's favour, After Asia's release, the daughter Eisham spoke to reporters, "Thank you everybody for praying for my mother. I'd also like to thank the brave judges and the Pakistani justice system that recognize my mother's

innocence. We thank God that she is free and I hope our entire family is finally happy and free. Thanks to all of you for praying for my mother and persecuted Christians.” The promise that God would be with them in their time of despair...the prayers of others...gave them hope.

Hope is a light in our darkness. It can be a small flame but still it helps us see our reality differently...to see it in a different light. Hope can burn from the faintest wick. Our wick is the promises of God...promises made and fulfilled. Fulfilled, like the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity. Fulfilled, like the first coming of the son of God. The wick is the promises of God on which we still await, that give us hope and strength in the storming moments we experience. Advent people are people of hope, because ours is a God who keeps promises. Ours is a God that intends a new age to come. Who will send the Son again. That’s our wick.

This table is a sign of hope for us. At the last supper Jesus promised, “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places, and I go to prepare a place for you....I will send the Holy Spirit who will be your comforter...Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit... Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Jesus talked about his death and resurrection, saying that in his death the disciples would know despair but in his resurrection they would know joy! A few days later they did know that joy. As do we. For as we gather round this table we remember that Jesus kept his promise, returning from death to life. And because he kept that promise we can trust in his other promises. We can have hope.

Hope can burn from the faintest wick...but the wick we have—the promises of God—is hardly faint.