

Text: Jeremiah 33: 10-16
Title: The Top Crust
Date: 11.29.09
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*This is a circuitous and clumsy way into this morning's text.
This is a little dense with history and a little long as a way to get to Christmas.
This could use a big screen for maps and pictures.
But, given those disclaimers...
Here we go....*

Armageddon is pictured in the book of Revelation as the gathering place for the last great battle. According to that reading there will be flashes of lightening, peals of thunder, and a severe earthquake. Cities will collapse, islands will fall away, and mountains will crumble. From the sky hailstones weighing hundreds of pounds will fall on people and...

And, you would think that Armageddon itself would be a dark and foreboding picture of the future, but instead it is a fascinating glimpse into the past.

During my recent trip to Israel I saw Armageddon and it is a modest mound surrounded by flat, irrigated, and orderly farmland. Armageddon is the Greek version of the Hebrew phrase *har Megiddo*. *Har* in Hebrew is "hill" or "mountain." So, *har Megiddo* is "the mountain of Megiddo."

And, Megiddo was a strategically located fortress city along one of the most influential trade routes of the ancient world. It was positioned at the front end of a pass ~ if there was any military or merchant movement it went through Megiddo. To go from Egypt to Mesopotamia you went through Megiddo. To go from the Mediterranean into Assyria you went through Megiddo.

Today Megiddo is an astonishing active archeological dig. Archeologists have uncovered 26 layers of different tribes or cultures built one on top of the other at Megiddo. With each battle, with each new conquering, with each new empire, the winners beat down and built on top of the previous tenant of Megiddo. So, like piling high a Big Mac each layer represents different cultures, different peoples, different gods....

The top crust, the last layer of Megiddo, was overrun and destroyed by the Babylonians at about 586 BC. No one has built on top of Megiddo since.

Now...

Now, Megiddo is connected to this morning's text because we pick up the prophet Jeremiah in the middle of proclaiming the imminent fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. King Nebuchadnezzar and his army were laying siege outside the city walls; disease and despair were laying siege inside the city walls. Jeremiah had been making something of a nuisance of himself by announcing this coming destruction. The people were about to lose everything that had given meaning to their lives ~ temple, city, home, king, priesthood, family, faith, covenant....

Desolation was beating down the door.
Wasteland was waiting in the wings.

The city would be in ruins and exile was the next exit.
There was nothing coming but dust and ash.

The destruction of Jerusalem and Megiddo are part of the same overrunning of Israel by the Babylonians. (*There are a few problems with that interpretation but I think it is true enough for our purposes.....*) After 400 years the reign of the Hebrews was over, their day was done, and they were about to be one more layer on the mountain of history.

But, in the middle of this avalanche of judgment rumbling and tumbling down, Jeremiah whispers a word of hope. In the midst of desolation Jeremiah voices consolation. For example in our text:

In the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted..... there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of the bride and bridegroom...

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 Righteousness.

It is a beautiful picture of hope. To mix metaphors ~
out of the stump of Jesse there will sprout a new branch,
out of the rubble of desolation there will be a new city,
on top of the last layer there will be another layer.

We read these lines in Jeremiah as foreshadowing Jesus. Coming from the line of David there will be a king who will embody justice and peace. He will be our righteousness. This is not the end of the story. Christmas is coming. Thanks be to God....

But, the spirit of these lines is that God will restore the land to his people. There is something very tangible, physical, and geographical. The images in this morning's text are of a life lived under a righteous rule where families and farm animals flourish. And, Jerusalem will be a place so defined by justice and peace that the city itself will be called "The Lord Our Righteousness." The city is synonymous with God's righteousness.

I think we can read this text not just as prophecy of the coming of Christ, but it is also as one more image of the will of God to restore creation to *shalom*. It's a picture not just of the first advent of Christ but also of his second coming. It's a prophetic snapshot not just of Jesus being born but of the culmination of history ~ where the last crust is not destruction and death but peace and mercy.

There is an old, oft quoted, multiple versioned, sermon story, that goes like this:

An old woman who knew that she didn't have long to live told her pastor, "When I die, I want you to promise me that you will carry out a special request. When the casket is opened at the funeral, and all my friends come by for a last look, I want them to see me ready to be buried with a fork in my right hand."

The pastor looked her at all puzzled and perplexed.

She continued, “When they clear the dishes after a big meal and someone says, “Keep your fork,” you know something good is coming ~ maybe a piece of apple pie or chocolate cake. Well, I want to be buried with a dessert fork in my hand. It will be my way of saying, “The best is yet to come.”

A few days later, she was buried with a fork in her hand just as she requested. Everyone who saw her in the casket saw her final silent witness. For her, death was not disaster but dessert.

It is a beautiful comic image. It is hard to forget ~ heaven as dessert.

It seems to me that a gross generalization of Christianity is that Jesus came at Christmas to save us so that we could go to heaven. If you believe the right things, and do the right things, you will get an eternal piece of pie at the end. The gift of Christmas is a desert fork by way of Jesus.

And, I would do nothing to diminish that abiding comfort. In the last few years we have sent some wonderful saints home to join the company of great witnesses gathered around God’ banquet table.

But, I do think we miss the powerful witness of scripture if we limit the gift of Christmas to desert at the end of the buffet.

The gift of Christmas is the righteousness of God and the restoration of *shalom* ~ come in Christ and coming again in Christ.

Now, we traced some of these same lines just a few weeks ago in the Gospel of Mark. And, from this preacher this may seem like a familiar-well-trod-territory. But, there is something else in this text that deserves our attention. There is something more here than the broad-big-screen-sweep of cosmic restoration. There is something here that is remarkably human, practical, and I think telling...

Jeremiah is in prison while prophesying that Jerusalem will be nothing but a vacant lot. The king put him in the tank because he was such a downer. And, the Babylonians are storming gates.....

But, while incarcerated, and at God’s instruction, Jeremiah enlists his cousin to buy a field on his behalf. Everything is going to hell in a hand basket and Jeremiah turns a title transaction. In a seller’s market Jeremiah is buying. He is dropping the prophetic plumb line while taking out a mortgage and signing a deed. The walls are gonna-come-a-tumblin-down and yet Jeremiah is investing in real estate. It is a beautiful comic image. It is hard to forget.

I think the word for it is *prolepsis* ~ which means acting as if what you expect to happen has already happened. Jeremiah puts his money where he mouth is. He doesn’t just whistle a happy tune about some sweet bye-and-bye, but he believes in the promise and invests in the land. Righteousness is coming and he’ll have a piece of it.

Dear Friends,

As that is true,

that the gift of Christmas is creation's restoration by way of Jesus Christ....

As that is true,

that out of the sawed off stump of Jesse will sprout new branch and on top of the last layer there will come God' righteousness....

As that is true,

to borrow language from Martine Luther King Jr., that, "unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word..."

As that is true,

so we wait with an active proleptic expectation.

Because, whatever the ruin,

whatever the wasteland,

whatever the desolation,

whatever the brokenness,

whatever the despair,

whatever the rupture,

whatever place you are in now ~ it is not the end!

The end is righteousness.

And because that is true, then we are called to invest in creation's good, buy the land, build the relationship, restore the breach, seek justice, rehab the house, create community, be lavish with forgiveness, work for the poor, mend the broken, and believe the promise. Those actions are not in vain....

They are part of the gift of Christmas.

For, the last layer, the top crust is not death and defeat.

The last layer, the top crust is restoration.

For last layer is "The Lord our Righteousness"

Let us join the banquet at God's table, and bring a desert fork, for it is a foretaste of what's coming.

Amen.