

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Redemption from Righteousness

Luke 21: 25-36
Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Rev. Dr. Galen E. Russell III
November 29, 2009

“In 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.”

Prayer: Holy One, while we are in your presence, please let the power and wisdom of your word give us hope for each moment. Amen.

OK... time for a show of hands... how many of you started your Christmas shopping on Black Friday after the noon hour? How many around or before noon (12 p.m.) on Friday? OK... how about before 9 a.m.? Before 6 a.m.? 4 a.m.? Anybody start shopping at midnight on Black Friday?

Black Friday is the unofficial sign that the Christmas shopping season has begun! Every mall and every retailer in America now are showing the unmistakable signs that Christmas is coming. All the decorations are up. All the lights are lit. Santa's showing up here and there. Even our sanctuary has the tell-tale sign that the Christmas days are surely coming! Our Advent wreath is up. One candle is lit. And, we have already heard people say that there are twenty-six shopping days left until Christmas. This is the beginning of the fun and excitement, the wonderful buildup of the joyfulness, and the

celebrations of Christmas. All these are all signs of what we foresee happening in the days to come.

Compare that to what Jesus foresees in the days ahead. Whoa! Not a pretty picture! Jesus speaks about the signs of the days to come, only his words don't impress us with a desire for joyful celebrations. His words can actually cause a sense of foreboding dread. His words sound like Armageddon... like 2012 is coming, like we are all soon to be wiped out. He says that the sun, the moon, the stars, the seas all will show signs that will cause people distress. He says that people will faint with fear of what is coming.

Jesus words sound like the alarm clock that is set to the "alarm" setting as opposed to the "music" setting. I don't know about you, but I cannot wake up to the "music" setting. If I have my alarm set to music, the music comes on, it enters my dreams, and I keep on sleeping. Yes, it is more pleasurable and can ease me into wakefulness, but often the process is too slow leading me to oversleep.

Now, the alarm setting is not pleasurable at all... it blares an obnoxious sound that makes me jump right away. And, if I'm not careful, I might accidentally hit the snooze button only to have the darn thing blasting again 9 minutes later. But, the "alarm" setting wakes me up quickly. Brings me to alertness right away. Jesus' words are designed to do that. His message is not pleasurable at all. It is disturbing, but his words can bring us to alertness, shaking us up, blasting us into wakefulness fast (*Homiletics*, Nov./Dec. 2009, p.

46).

The powerful thing Jesus teaches about being alert to the signs is that we not to faint with fear as others do who have no hope. Rather, when we see the signs of the times, we should stand tall, raise our heads, and be filled with confidence and faith. Why? Because we believe that God has redeemed us through Christ Jesus, the Righteous Branch of God.

Just like the way our Giant card facsimiles on the bulletin insert are taken to Bonnie and redeemed for the real Giant card with real value, so are our lives taken to God by Christ Jesus and redeemed. We, therefore, are given new life with real value, with real restoration. We have real purpose in our lives. We have real assurance that God and consequently many other people really care about us! When we have real redemption from Jesus, the Righteous Branch of God, we have real hope!

Friends, that hope comes in the birth of Jesus. His birth represents the fulfillment of God's promise to get us through anything we face in life. Whatever struggles you are enduring now, the days are coming when those struggles will end. Maybe you're trying to kick the cigarette habit. Have hope in God to get you through it. Maybe you're dealing with a health issue. Have hope in God's redemption. Maybe the job hunt has gone on way too long, maybe battle against loneliness has become too much... take heart—God's promise is real. Whatever stress you face now, the days are coming when that stress will cease. Whatever decisions you are wrestling with, those decisions will

have an outcome. The long-term circumstances or life situations you experience now are neither permanent or ultimate, for your redemption is drawing near. Believe in God's promise that Jeremiah speaks in chapter 29, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29: 11).

God wants to give us a future with hope! How wonderful is that! And I suspect that God wants this thread of redemptive hope to be woven, not just in our personal lives, but throughout our churches, our communities and our culture, throughout our political systems, our educational systems, and our systems of capitalism, too. In this economic crisis that has shaken our financial security, have hope—we will make it. In the crisis of the flu pandemic, have faith for the days are coming when we will live in health and wellness. In the crisis of terrorism, raise your heads because soon, we will live in safety and security.

Redemptive hope can be found in all these places because God has sent the Righteous Branch to execute justice and righteousness in all these areas. And the Spirit of that Righteous Branch, whom we claim is Jesus Christ, lives in each of us. Because we gather collectively as a people filled with the Spirit of Christ, we become the church who acts as God's agent in the world. We ARE redeemed people—redeemed by the righteousness of Christ, but that means little if we don't apply the principles of our faith

to the crises at hand, if we don't act on our faith as God's representatives.

Perhaps, as church people, we are to embrace efforts to do justice and righteousness as God's agents in the world. We have enormous potential to do both of these which makes our church work possible, but humanity's natural inclination to injustice and unrighteousness makes our church work necessary.

This means, as Christians we say yes to all actions with one another that reflects God's redeeming grace. We say yes to doing justice and righteousness with one another. We say yes to coming to church, worshiping, finding hope for tomorrow in our every day existence. We also learn to discern what is good and say "This is good." When we as church people support one another and lift up each other in our prayers, or share some of our resources so another person can experience love, we know this is good. Such discernment of what is good is a reflection that we've been redeemed by the Righteous Branch of God.

However, as Christian church people, don't we also have to discern what is bad and learn to say, "This must not be?" And don't we have to develop the courage to say, "This must not be" even when we face opposition? Even when we are unable to identify how to undo the way something bad is?

I believe we have to have this discernment in our personal lives and our public lives. We have to have it in our systems of education, business, government. We have to have

this discernment in our communities, our culture, our churches. Such discernment of what must not be is also a reflection that we've been redeemed by the Righteous Branch of God.

I read two separate snippets of two churches that were laid out side by side in a Christian periodical. One church is a mega-church with a weekly attendance of about 1600 people in Illinois. The other church is a small church not unlike Chapel Hill, located in Minnesota.

The pastor of the mega-church decided to increase church attendance by having a weekly drawing from a bag. The pastor would draw the number of a seat somewhere in the auditorium and the occupant of the seat would be the winner of a cash prize of \$250 or \$500. The pastor says that he knows it's a gimmick to get people to church, but it seems to be working. Since this drawing began, weekly attendance surged from 1600 people to 2500 people.

The pastor of the small church laments the fact that the clearer he is about the cost of discipleship, the smaller his congregation gets. The church board tells him he should go on the road giving seminars on church shrinkage rather than church growth. That's harsh! This pastor says that the church needs "visionary leaders who will challenge the status quo... and will help people wake up to the many ways our lives have been co-opted by the culture" (*The Christian Century*, December 1, 2009, p. 8).

Which one reflects most clearly being redeemed from the Righteous Branch? Which one is practicing discernment of what is good? Which one is practicing discernment of what must not be? Which one is executing justice and righteousness?

Both churches are reflecting the signs of the times. Both churches have broken wings, as all churches do. But, in both cases, God's promises of hope are real. In both cases, personal lives can be redeemed by the One who comes from God. In both cases, people of those churches are to apply the principles of faith to their church life, no matter what the signs of the times are.

So, men of faith, rise up and sing. For your redemption is drawing near. Women of the truth, stand and sing to broken hearts. Rise up church with broken wings, fill this place with songs again, of our God who reigns on high. By God's grace again we'll fly. Let's stand and sing! Amen.