

This first Sunday of Advent is also the first Sunday of the new church year. A new beginning. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel." The prophet Jeremiah speaks this prophecy when Israel is on the verge of being conquered by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar; what will become the Babylonian Exile. This promise made by God to God's people comes at a time when they need some good news. It's a message of hope. The perfect message for Advent perhaps, more so this year. Two years besieged by COVID, many of us dealing with losses of all kinds; disappointments, challenges. Like the people of Jerusalem, our lives have been upended. Things we once took for granted have been taken away. Jeremiah's prophecy offered God's people assurance that life would return to normal. That is God's promise to us as well.

But I find myself asking "when?" When will our lives return to "normal?" What even IS normal anymore. Jeremiah tells us God's promise but not God's timeline.

Have you ever waited for a promise to be fulfilled?

When I was a kid, I used to go to my Dad's every other weekend. When he moved to a new house, he set up a bedroom for me for when I visited. I wanted a purple wall in my new bedroom so he promised he'd do that. But he didn't say when. I assumed it would be the next weekend I went to stay with him, but when I walked into the room expecting to see purple, I saw the same grungy white wall. Of course, I was disappointed. But I held out hope that maybe the next time. And the next time, the wall was still the same color. I waited and hoped, and finally, one weekend several months later, the wall was purple. My dad had made good on his promise. All I needed was patience. I didn't need to complete a set of tasks or check off items on a list. I just needed to wait.

God fulfills His promise and all that's required of us is to have patience. Speaking for myself, patience is not my strong suit, just ask my husband. We dated for six years before we got married and I pestered him for the last three years before our engagement. The wait, while annoying, was worth it.

Patience seems to be in short supply during this time of year. We live in two different worlds; the weekday world of Christmas music in the grocery store 20 minutes after the end of Halloween, holiday shopping ads and emails flooding our inboxes; and the liturgical world of Advent. A season of waiting, watching for God's fulfilled promise. God's time is different as Jeremiah's words remind us. A necessary message during this season of Advent when everyone is plunging ahead to Christmas.

Also, necessary as many of us, so weary of COVID, masks, fear, and grief, want to get back to normal. I remember when news of a viable vaccine came out, I was hopeful that we were nearing the end of the pandemic. That has not been the case, but with some patience, I believe we will get there. During Jeremiah's time, God's promise had not been fulfilled. Looking at this passage centuries later, we can take comfort in the knowledge that it was fulfilled with the birth of the Messiah. God makes good on God's promises. Israel would be restored; the Davidic line would once again sprout forth and "Jerusalem would live in safety." But forever changed. Just as we are forever changed. God's promise offers hope but doesn't erase our human experiences. Even in the waiting, God is with us. God does not abandon us during the hardships, though, it may feel like it. God's presence can be difficult to feel in the midst of difficult times. In those times, we can cling to God's promise; knowing that God's promises will always be fulfilled.