

**Sermon preached by Dr. David Fischler at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 29, 2015**

**IN THOSE DAYS**

**Jeremiah 33:10-16**

Over the last year or so, I've been doing a lot of genealogical research. It's mostly been on Maryanne's family because there are a lot more documents and a lot more information to be found about her. (By the way, I'll just throw this in parenthetically. If you ever find yourself talking to her and she nods off in the middle of the conversation, there's a genetic reason for that. She is descended from the Van Winkle family. No joke! She really is. Washington Irving did not make up Rip Van Winkle, at least not his family. They're from the Netherlands and on her father's side she's descended from them.) Anyway, that's gotten me to thinking about members of my family, about whom I can't find all that much, but about whose lives I do know something. In particular, I found myself thinking about my paternal grandmother, Mary Snaidman Fischler. She was born in the last days of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in 1900, in the Warsaw Russian Empire. When she was born there was no Poland. About the same time she was born, the father of her future husband, Isadore, migrated to the United States from the town of Bochnia, near Krakow, in the province of Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that's now part of Poland. But there wasn't any Poland when she was born.

As she was growing up on the streets of Warsaw, she would have noticed, I'm sure, that virtually everyone got around in the same way, either on foot or by horse or at best in a carriage pulled by a horse. When she was born man had not invented heavier-than-air flight. The Wright Brothers were still three years from doing that. As she grew, she would have seen changes in the world and when she was 13 she would have seen war coming to her country in the form of the German invasion of the Russian Empire. In 1916, to escape that war, her mother and two brothers boarded a ship, having fled somehow or another across central Europe, in Amsterdam and sailed to the United States. Soon thereafter she would have met her husband, Isadore and eventually she had three children. In her mid-forties she would have read the newspapers or listened to the radio and heard the horrifying news that more than a million of her fellow Polish Jews had been wiped out, exterminated in the Holocaust. Three years later she would have had the exhilarating experience of joining with Jews around the world in giving thanks to God for the founding of the Jewish State, Israel. Of course, she would have also over the next 22 remaining years of her life seen Israel have to fight for its existence on three different occasions.

At around the same time, she would have seen her first television and no doubt marveled as so much of populations of western nations did at this amazing invention that allowed them to hear news and receive entertainment with the push of a button or the flip of a switch. And then, in the last year of her life, she would have used that television to watch mankind take its first steps on the moon. She died in 1970. I was 12 at the time. Her life and mine overlapped enough so that I knew her. I knew that still-lingering Polish accent of hers. And I knew that she thought that the world had completely changed in the course of her 70 years. Of course, what did she know? In the course of my lifetime human beings have gone to the moon, computers have been invented, terrorism has become a worldwide problem, Israel's existence

continues to be threatened and there are those who talk almost daily about the possible end of the world. Not to the second coming of Jesus but because of environmental catastrophe or nuclear war or bio-terrorism or any of a number of other things that you could conceive of.

From 1900 to 2015, you could have forgiven my grandmother and maybe even me for thinking that the world has completely changed in the course of those years. And of course in many ways it has changed. The map of Europe looks completely different. Technological advances are so numerous that it's almost impossible to name them. And yet there are some things that have not changed. We still live in a corrupt and fallen world. I know that's a shocking thing to say. I know it's something that had never crossed your mind. I know that you thought that mankind was generally good and that inevitably progress would be made as we moved upward atop the scale of evolution. I know you've thought that. Well, if you haven't thought it there are millions of people whom you call your countrymen who do think that. But we know that we still live in a corrupt and fallen world and things like the Holocaust and terrorism are not simply the bi-products of human beings who are not balanced or who are unhappy with their lives. But rather that these are expressions of fallen human nature. That hasn't changed.

There's another thing that hasn't changed, and that's the promise of the One who created this corrupt and fallen world. Not in that form, of course, but pristine and pure, only later to fall. What has not changed is that the Creator of that world and of that fallen human race is no different from what He was in 1900, regardless of what has happened since. Nor is He any different from the One who called Abraham to be His man and from whom He would bring forth a people almost 4,000 years ago. Nor has He changed from the time when His people had come to express in their very being the corrupt and fallen nature of humanity. For even the people of God sin, and sin mightily.

Jeremiah lived in such a day. Jeremiah lived in a time of desolation for Israel, in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Jeremiah's time the leadership of the people of God was hopelessly corrupt as well as divided. Divided between those who were pro-Babylonian and those who were pro-Egyptian. Those who looked to the east for their salvation and those who looked to the west. Both of them joined together in the conviction that the salvation of their people lay in political alliances. And these factions engaged in continual intrigues against one another. Intrigues that, truth be told, would make those on Capitol Hill or at the White House look like child's play. People died as a result of those intrigues. Intrigues that were undertaken not for the good of the nation, but rather for the good of the factions. And these intrigues and the opportunities and the threats that they posed to outside forces, because even within Israel there was a certain amount of influence on the rest of the world, they also presented certain opportunities. Opportunities that were taken advantage of, especially by that power from the east, Babylonia, in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries led by the King Nebuchadnezzar who eventually in 587 destroyed Jerusalem and with it the kingdom of Judah.

This is how one commentator characterized Jehoiakim, who was the king of Judah for much of this period, from 609 to 597 BC, one under whom Jeremiah wrote and whom he would have known well. Jehoiakim has been characterized as the worst and most ungodly of Judah's kings. He has been labeled a blood-thirsty tyrant, an inveterate enemy of the truth.

He cared nothing for the worship of the God of Israel, exacted exorbitant taxes, used forced labor without pay and had no regard for the word or prophet of God. He sponsored idolatry and had no concern for the widespread social injustice in his realm. Any of this sound familiar? As I said, some things do not change. Some things change year to year or even century to century, but the truth about humanity remains the same. The truth about humanity as fallen and corrupt is no less different in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century than it was in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> century in Israel.

Not only was the nation at a low ebb. So was the spiritual life of the people. No one in Judah felt safe because of the incessant warfare, for that matter the threats from their own government, threats of potential enslavement or murder. The Temple was plundered by foreigners on more than one occasion – in 597 at the end of Jehoiakim’s reign as well as in 587 when Jerusalem fell. Idolatry was rampant. People lost faith in God. They sought help and they sought solace elsewhere, thinking that God had abandoned His people, thinking that they were on their own, thinking that they had to solve their own problems and thinking that they had to provide their own salvation. For some people that involved engaging in political alliances. For some people in involved turning their worship over to Baal or to other gods. The law of God, not the law of a secular state, given through Moses and its protections for the poor and the outcast was essentially forgotten. The mood of the people with regard to the times and place in which they lived is well captured at the beginning of verse 10: “This is what the LORD says you say (what the people say). You say about this place, ‘It is a desolate waste without men or animals.’” That’s not to be taken with ironclad literalness. He does not mean that all of the people have left Jerusalem or Judah. There are still people there, but the population has been reduced and many have been killed and even carried off by foreign powers. There were still animals, but nothing like the kind of animal base to their economy that was needed in order for it to work. The term here that’s really important is “desolate waste.” When they looked at their country, when they looked at their capital, when they looked at their spiritual life, they saw a desert. They saw a place that was barely, if not completely, uninhabitable. This was a people that was hopeless. This was a people who thought some kind of end was near and that when it came they weren’t going to like it much.

In a time of hopelessness, Jeremiah came proclaiming, “Yes, you’re corrupt. Yes, you’re fallen. Yes, you are sinful.” And that’s the way we think of Jeremiah. He’s sometimes called the weeping prophet because he wept over his people. His heart was burdened and he was saddened by what he saw in his people in those days. He knew that terrible times were ahead of them. And indeed, in 587, with the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem and of Judah and the carrying off of the leadership of the people of Israel there were dark days. Terrible days. And yet, even in the midst of his weeping, even in the midst of seeing what was ahead, God showed him something that was farther down the road.

And so it is in this passage he proclaims not hopelessness, but hope based on God and His promises. God is the primary speaker in this passage, speaking through Jeremiah. What He tells Jeremiah to tell the people is this: “This place that you think is desolate, this place that you think is no longer fit for human beings, much less for animals, in this place where the streets are deserted,” guess what? Look at the end of verse 10 and verse 11. “There will be

heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD.”

Three different pictures there. The first, the happiness, the joyfulness of a wedding. I'm sure most of you have been to a wedding at one point or another, either as one of the people being wed or as a guest. And you know that, at least if everything goes the way that it's supposed to, there are few times that are happier in the lives of people. When you come together with that person whom you are mated to for life, with whom you will face life's joys and sorrows, but with whom you will face them together, with whom you know you can get through anything, it's a wonderful time, a wedding is. A wedding is a joyful time. And here it's used as a picture of what's to come, a time of celebration. Nobody was celebrating Jehoiakim's blood-thirstiness. No one was celebrating the external threat from Babylonia. No one was celebrating the utter lack of justice in the way the nation was administered. But the day will come, the Lord says through Jeremiah, the day will come when you will indeed celebrate, when life will be renewed.

Verse 11 also offers us another picture, not just of home life renewed but of spiritual life renewed. To those who bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord, the Temple seems abandoned at this point. The law of God is no longer, at least as far as the people are concerned. The sacrifices lie neglected. And yet there will come a day when the voices of worship will again be raised in the Temple. Voices of praise will be heard there again. Thanksgiving will be offered. Give thanks to the Lord Almighty, for the Lord is good. His love endures forever. That will be proclaimed again. Even though you can't see it in these dark days, this will happen again.

He also mentions in verses 12 and 13 another picture of the days that are to come. In this place, desolate and without men or animals, as bad as things are right now in all of the towns of this place, there will again be pastures for shepherds to rest their flocks. They can't do that now because of the incessant war, both the internal struggle and the external threats. They can't do that now but they will be able to. In the towns of the hill country, south of Jerusalem. In the territory of Benjamin to its north. In the villages around Jerusalem, such as Bethlehem. In all of the towns of Judah. In all of this kingdom flocks will again pass under the hand of the one who counts them. Shepherds will take their flocks out, not worried about their being stolen or killed by lawless bandits or passing armies. But they will go out into those fields and they will be peaceful. They will go in and they will come out and life will be different. All of this in these three images of hope for the future give the people of Judah a promise. A promise that's stated in verse 11: “I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were before” says the Lord. ‘I will act. And what you see now that is so dire, what you see now that is so terrible, this will be changed because I will act.’”

You may or may not know, in the late 40s and following, many Jews ceased worshipping God, ceased going to the synagogues, ceased having anything to do with the faith of their fathers. They lost faith in the God of Israel because of the revelations regarding the Holocaust. They said: “God abandoned us during that time. He allowed millions of us to be killed. If God could do that, then either He must not be real or He must not care. And if that's the case there's no reason for me to have anything to do with Him ever again.”

Whenever I read stories like that I always want to ask them: Has this not happened before? Have not the people of God undergone suffering and persecution and death before? Have they not known evil times? And the answer of course is yes. You don't have to go through Jewish history. Just look at the Old Testament. Just look at what happened to Israel over and over again, a nation repeatedly mismanaged. A nation repeatedly betrayed. A nation repeatedly attacked. A nation defeated and destroyed. A people in part losing their identity, at least in terms of the northern kingdom. A people that died in uncounted numbers. Yes, the Holocaust is terrible. It's awful. It's perhaps the worst thing that has ever happened to the Jewish people. No question about that. In terms of its scope it may be unprecedented. In terms of what it is, in terms of what it was, hardly. And if any of us are watching the news these days and saying, "Gee, you know things have never been worse," read some history. Things have been worse. Things have been a lot worse. Even my grandmother, living what she lived through, was able to tell me in the late 60s (which, if you remember, were not exactly a bed of roses either): "You know, I've seen some terrible things in my life and now happens to be a bit better." And at the same time she remained very much a Jew and so she knew that there was a fair likelihood that they were going to get worse because they always do. They always get worse and they always get better. And the amazing thing is that according to God speaking through Jeremiah, He knew about this cycle. He knew about the ups and the downs that His people went through. He knew about their practice of falling into sin. And He came to rescue them and He did it over and over and over again. And one day there would be a final restoration. Because in this setting, He says the Messiah will appear.

Verses 14-16 he says: "'The days are coming,' says the Lord, 'when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.'" That's an interesting expression. By the time that Jeremiah wrote there was no house of Israel. Israel had been destroyed a hundred years before and its people had been scattered by the conquering Assyrians. And yet this promise is not just for those who happened to inhabit the political entity called the kingdom of Judah. This was for all of the people of God, wherever they might be, under whatever circumstances they might be living. This promise was for them. And here's the promise: "'In those days and at that time I will make a righteous branch sprout from David's line. I will raise up a Man, a King, One who will rule My people. And He will do what is just and right in the land. Unlike your current politicians or the politicians of your recent past, or the politicians of your farther past, or the politicians of your future, He will do what is just and right in the land. He will not be simply a politician. He will be My Anointed,' says God."

In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. Everything will be different. This is the name by which It, or He in some scripts, will be called, the Lord our Righteousness. That's the Messiah. The Lord our Righteousness. He will be a righteous branch of David's royal house. He will be a King of unquestioned justice and righteousness, unlike Judah's kings. He will save His people. It's interesting. In those days Judah will be saved. The word is *yasu*, which refers to spiritual salvation, salvation from sin, salvation from death, salvation for the kingdom of God rather than physical salvation. All of this will happen, he says, and a marvelous name will be bestowed upon His people and/or His Messiah. That name is *Zedekenu*, the Lord is our Righteousness, in order to indicate where that salvation comes from. It hasn't come from the politicians. It hasn't come from the

political structures. It hasn't come from reformed culture. It's come from God and from Him alone.

And the wonderful thing is, He doesn't hold this out as a possibility. You'll remember as I started the exposition of this passage I mentioned that this was a hopeless people and that Jeremiah brought hope. We need to always remember, especially on this Sunday of hope, what that word means in a Christian context and in a biblical context. It does not refer to what we would like to see happen. I know that there are some of you, people who believe in miracles, who hope that the Redskins win the Super Bowl. You people also believe in the Tooth Fairy, I'm sure. But that's not the hope we're talking about. This isn't about what I would like to see happen. It's not about who I want to see win the Super Bowl or the next presidential election. It's not about what I would like to see Congress pass in the way of legislation. It's about knowing that something is going to happen and looking forward to it. The hope that we have is the understanding that God has made a promise and He will fulfill it.

Verse 14 says: "The days are coming when I will (not might, if the circumstances are right or if human beings allow Me to) fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah." And how do we know that He will do that? We don't just know that because He says so, but we know that because of Who He is. Is there anyone here who has ever kept every single promise you ever made to anyone? I didn't think so. I know I haven't. I don't know of any human being who has ever kept every promise that he or she has ever made. That's because, quite frankly, there are times when we find it inconvenient to keep our promises and so we choose not to. We may even think that we have a good reason, but what we've done is that we've broken our word and that's a sign of our fallenness. God, on the other hand, keeps all of His promises, not just because He is powerful enough to do so, though that's true as well. But He keeps all of His promises because it is in His very nature and character to do what He says He's going to do. And if the circumstances aren't right or if people oppose Him, He doesn't back down, He doesn't give in, He doesn't say, "Well, never mind." He fulfills those promises regardless.

That's what the hope of Israel was, that God would fulfill His promises. That is what our hope is about as well because, you see, the message of hope that Jeremiah has for the people of Israel is a message that he has for us, as well. We don't live in 600 BC and we're not threatened by Babylonia. But we're threatened by other things. We still live in a dangerous world. We still live in a world in which there are some people who are afraid to walk the streets of Washington, D. C. Either because of its residents or because of the threat of terrorism or just random acts of violence. There are people who worry about wars and rumors of wars. There are people who worry about natural disasters, who worry about things like environmental degradation. They worry about this and it eats them up. And they're terrified about what the world has in store for them. But the message that Jeremiah brings to us, the message that Jeremiah gives to us from God, is "Be not afraid." Terrorism, random acts of violence, environmental degradation, nuclear war, whatever your fears are, lay them aside. It's not to say that they can't get you in this life. It is to say there is something more and it is to come and it will come because He has promised. When He says, "In those days Judah will be saved," that's not just a message for the southern kingdom. That's a message for us as well. The salvation that He promised to His people He promised to all of His people, northern

and southern kingdoms, Israel and Judah, Jew and Gentile. To all who heard the call of His Messiah He has promised that salvation. Not as a possibility. Not as something that might happen if you're good. Not as something that you can earn. But as something that He will give you. It's a promise. It's a sure and certain thing. That's one aspect of the promise of hope.

The second aspect is that we as His people will have, and in fact now do have, a mighty and righteous Head. What the people of Jeremiah's day could only look forward to we can look back to and give thanks to God for giving us the One who rules over us. And He does not rule over us arbitrarily, He does not rule over us for His own benefit, but He rules over us as a just and righteous King. What we hear Him saying in the gospels is not something that He thought would be a nice thing to do. Rather, when He rules us as King, as He tells us that this is what we're called to, He is calling us to follow Him as just and righteous as well. That message of hope, of course, is not just for the past, not just for the 1<sup>st</sup> century, not just for the day that we became Christians, but for our entire lives.

Then a third aspect of that message of hope is that God will build up His people regardless of the opposition of this world. There are an awful lot of people right now in the west, in the United States in particular, who think that Christianity is on the wane. That the opposition of a secular culture that has no use whatsoever for the gospel or for the moral message that it has for us or for anything else about it, we think that that secular culture in its opposition is going to cause us to shrink and to disappear and to leave the world bereft of a Christian witness. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Nothing. Whatever difficulties we may be experiencing now God will bring us through them. We may have to pay a pretty steep price in the process, but He will bring us through them. And if anybody thinks that He will leave Himself without a witness, you need only look to South America, to Africa, to Asia, to those parts of the world where the faith is exploding.

Do you really think that God has left Himself without a witness, that things are so bad that we can ignore the message of hope that He gives us because things are so awful? Guess what? Islam is on the run. Islam is on the run in many parts of the world. It's part of the reason for the response of radicals. These are people who don't operate out of a position of strength, but a position of fear. They are afraid they are being marginalized. And the reason they are afraid they are being marginalized in the world is because they know, they can see it all around them, that the gospel is marching, that people are coming to Christ, in some places in unprecedented numbers in the Muslim world. And when they see that, they are afraid. And if they are really smart they are afraid because they've read the Christian documents. They've read the Bible and they know what the promises are. And they know that no matter how much they try to ignore them or downplay them or attack them, much less reject them, those promises will stand for all time. Jeremiah calls us not to despair. As bad as the times that he lived in were, he calls us to hope, to faith, to service. All on the basis of the promises God has made to us. That, my friends, is what Advent and Christmas and for that matter Easter and Pentecost, are all about.