

In our text today, the prophet Jeremiah says that “*a righteous Branch*” will spring up for Jesse’s son, King David (v. 15). This branch is a colorful symbol for the season of Advent, one we can easily picture in our imaginations. Deep black roots, sturdy brown branches, tender green shoots; very much like what the prophet Isaiah says, “*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots*” (11:1). We sing about this branch at Christmas, “Lo, how a rose e’er blooming, from tender stem hath sprung, of Jesse’s lineage coming, by faithful prophets sung.” The “righteous Branch” is nothing less than an emoji from God, a picture-character that points to something, or in this case, someone else. So easy to see, and beautiful to sing about. But what in the world does it *mean*?

About 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah foretold that the people of Israel would be overrun by the Babylonians and taken into captivity. But he also spoke of the restoration of Jerusalem and its leaders. “*The days are surely coming,*” says the Lord through the prophet, “*when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David*” (vv. 14-15). God’s emoji: a righteous Branch, springing up for King David. “*He shall execute justice and righteousness in the land,*” God says. “*In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is our righteousness*” (vv. 15-16).

The prophet is talking about the leadership of the future. A “righteous Branch” would spring from the family tree of King David, the greatest of Israel’s kings, the one who was (despite his flaws) “*a man after [God’s] own heart*” (1 Samuel 13:14). With his focus on justice and righteousness, this new leader would restore the fortunes of God’s people. Old Testament scholar Patrick Miller says that this leader’s focus would not be simply on “abundance, productivity and partying.” Instead, he “will rightly render the affairs of the people and will lead them in their worship of the Lord.”

This new leader is, of course, Jesus Christ, born into the house and family of David (Luke 2:4). He is the one who teaches us righteousness. Jesus wants us to show love and justice and righteousness in our relationships with each other and in our relationship with God. Jesus is God’s greatest emoji, our righteous Branch.

So, how can we apply this message of righteousness to our lives, as we follow Jesus into the future? For starters, we need to realize that righteousness is all about right relationship. To be in right relationship with the people around us, we search for the image of God in each person. We should act as though Jesus himself is hidden inside every one of our brothers and sisters. We should remember how Jesus said that we are really serving him when we give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, and comfort to the prisoner (Matthew 25:35-36). Maybe one of the reasons that Jesus came into the world as a weak and vulnerable child was to remind us of the importance of caring for the least among us.

Right relationship means treating others as you would like to be treated. As Jesus grew up to say in the Sermon on the Mount, “*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; this is the law and the prophets*” (Matthew 7:12). In this single verse, Jesus offers what it means to execute justice and righteousness in the land: the heart open to those in need, the mind open to the prompting of the Spirit, the arms open to do the work of ministry.

But righteousness also has a divine dimension. Being in right relationship with God is not just going to worship and giving offerings and serving meals and building homes. It means paying attention to “*the weightier matters of the law,*” says Jesus, “*justice and mercy and faith*” (Matthew 23:23). It means practicing the kind of religion that James says is “*pure and undefiled before God,*” a religion that challenges people “*to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world*” (James 1:27). We can only be in right relationship with our God when first we are in right relationship with one another. Jesus came to show us how to be right with each other so that we might be right with God.

When Bishop Michael Curry preached at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle last spring, he could have offered a sweet and sentimental sermon. But he surprised everyone by giving a message on civil rights and social justice, “in the name of our loving, liberating, and self-giving God.” Yes, he talked about love, but he also talked about executing justice and righteousness in the land. In front of an international audience, Bishop Curry heralded God’s emoji, “a righteous Branch,” Jesus Christ.

## God's Emoji

Sunday, December 2, 2018

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Matthew 25:31-40

"When love is the way," said Bishop Curry, "then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more. When love is the way, there's plenty good room — plenty good room — for all of God's children." Bishop Curry challenged us to follow Jesus, our new leader from God.

As we gather at the communion table this morning, we take two more symbols – bread and the cup – to help us remember how Jesus, the righteous branch," came to initiate God's Kingdom of justice and righteousness. Jesus taught us to be in right relationship with God and each other. He lived and died to set us free from sin and death. He rose again to offer us a new and better life, now and in the future.

Amid the emojis of the world this season, let's remember the "righteous branch" that God caused to spring up for our sake: Jesus, the Christ, the babe from Bethlehem. With this "righteous Branch" as a central symbol for our lives, we discover what it means to be right with each other and with God. God's emoji, Jesus, always means righteousness. The message is clear, both in Advent and throughout the year.

Prayer: Holy God of Hope, give us ears to hear and hearts to trust the promises you offer to us in this season of Advent. As we worship together, we offer ourselves to you and we open ourselves to your abundant grace. **Amen.**

### Sources:

- "Bishop Michael Curry's royal wedding sermon: Full text of 'The power of love.'" npr.org. May 20, 2018.
- Miller, Patrick. "The book of Jeremiah." *New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, 826.

Emojis are common fare on smartphones these days. Emojis are the little pictures that we use in place of words when messaging our friends. You know, like 🙄 ❤️ U ("I love you") or the universal thumbs up (👍) when we like something and the frowning face (☹️) when we don't like something. The word "emoji" comes from two Japanese words: *e* (meaning "picture") and *moji* (meaning "character"). We're a culture obsessed with using these picture-characters to describe our moods and thoughts.

There are always new emojis being added to this pictorial lexicon. Back in October, Apple added 70 new emojis to the lineup. Which is good news, because if I ever run across a lobster playing lacrosse with a llama, I will have just the right emojis to capture the moment and share it with friends.

Now that we're in Advent, there are lots of picture-characters that represent the holiday season: Santa Claus, presents, candy canes, holly wreaths, reindeer, and stockings (just to name a few). We've decorated our sanctuary with images: the Christmas tree, the star, and the Advent candles. These images mean something; they evoke in us a sense of nostalgia or wonder, of joy and faith.

Well, long before emojis, God used signs and symbols to share with us some important truths. God used a rainbow to signify God's promise never to flood the earth again. God used the images of water and fire to teach us that our sins are washed away, and we are purified. God used the image of a lamb to describe the sacrifice Jesus would make on our behalf. Early Christians drew the symbols of the fish and the cross to demonstrate their faith in Jesus, and the anchor to signify safety, the dove to represent God's peace, and the peacock to represent heaven and immortality.