

## Advent Hope in Uncertain Times – Natalie Mauer

When I first moved to Missoula in 1994, there was a man who walked around and stood on street corners downtown with a bible. Sometimes he seemed to shout, although, he was probably just talking loudly to be heard.

I can't remember exactly what it was he was saying, and I knew it was biblical. He was living into what he felt God wanted him to do.

Growing up in dairy communities in PA and NJ, I'd never experienced anything like him before AND he caught my attention, and I remember him still.

His presence often left people feeling uncomfortable. Was he crazy?

Would he do something dangerous? Or would he influence me to do some self-reflection?

Later I learned his name was Forrest "RED" Bex. Maybe you remember him.

I am citing information I found 4 years ago when I was thinking of Red. I believe this information was compiled for the Missoula Cemetery's Stories and Stones program and the document references its sources as Missoulain news articles, Missoula City Cemetery records, and Red's daughter Eula May Zarling.

"Red was a Jack-of-all-trades. Red owned a seven-acre wrecking yard and recycling business located outside Missoula near the Wye junction.

He staked and worked a mine claim near the town of Garnet, Montana.

Some of his other jobs included: baking bread for Eddy's Bakery, hauling garbage for Raymond Stickney, hauling metal antenna scraps off the mountains for the two local ski resorts, and driving Lowboy Dump Trucks from Frenchtown to Philipsburg during the interstate construction.

Red was a heavy drinker and barroom brawler. All this changed in 1977 when, as a regular patron of the Missoula County Jail, Red saw a shaft of light in his cell one night that he believed was an angel calling him to preach the Word of God. Upon his release, Red stopped drinking, grabbed his Bible, and headed to the streets.

Red became one of Missoula's most colorful and memorable characters. He was a self-proclaimed street preacher who could be found on any downtown street corner at any time. "Some nights I'll preach demons, some nights I'll preach hell, some nights I'll preach love."

Although his clothing was tattered and he had very little money, he possessed a wealth of spirit and goodwill that he extended to all. Red would gyrate and scream one-line messages to motorists and pedestrians as they passed by, stretching the words for attention. "You got to have the L-O-O-O-V-E, the J-O-O-O-Y, the P-E-E-E-AA-C-E!"

Red helped countless kids in his day. He had a boxing program and would never turn anyone down.

Some people were afraid of him, but most loved him and watched out for him. Business owners made sure he had a hot meal, locals made sure he stayed warm, and teenagers protected him from out-of-town ruffians. Red never accepted any money for his sermons but was known to give money or clothing to anyone who needed it."

Red called himself a Simple Street Preacher, which you'll find engraved on his head stone. From Bar Brawler to Street Preacher, he believed in his calling to preach the word, was changed by that calling and persisted even though many in the world saw him as a fanatic.

Red's calling reminds me of another voice called into hard places — the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was an Old Testament prophet in Jerusalem during the final decades of the Kingdom of Judah. Nicknamed the "weeping prophet,"

Jeremiah, is known for his grief and lament over the sins and impending destruction of his people, the nation of Judah.

Jeremiah was a young man when he was called by God to warn the people about their idolatry and social injustice, prophesying that the Babylonian army would conquer Jerusalem and take them into exile for their sins. Despite the message of judgment, Jeremiah also delivered prophecies of hope for a future restoration and a new covenant.

The book of Jeremiah was written during a season of deep upheaval. God's people were living through a mix of spiritual confusion, social fracture, and looming national crisis. While our world today is different in countless ways, the themes Jeremiah addresses still echo in our moment.

Jerusalem was caught between empires, unsure what the future held. People didn't know who to trust, what news to believe, or how to feel secure.

We also live in a time when people feel unsteady—from global conflicts and political division to economic anxiety and rapid cultural change. The sense of “what will happen next?” is something people everywhere feel.

In Jeremiah's day, false prophets promised easy answers and quick fixes. They told people what they wanted to hear, not what would truly heal them.

We have our own versions of false hopes. Voices promising instant peace, prosperity, or identity. Social media “truths,” celebrity gurus, and political extremes can become modern false prophets, offering comfort without substance.

Jeremiah spoke against leaders and systems that ignored the vulnerable and pursued their own gain. The community was fractured, with people turning inward rather than toward one another.

We see similar fractures: groups talking past each other, neighbors distrusting neighbors, the vulnerable overlooked, and many people struggling to feel seen or valued.

Many of the people Jeremiah tried to reach worshiped God outwardly but lived inwardly distant. Ritual continued, but relationship faded.

We know many today are spiritually hungry but disconnected—seeking meaning, but overwhelmed by noise. Even people of faith can find themselves going through motions rather than renewal.

Jeremiah is not just a book of warning; it's a book of hope. God promises a future, renewal, a "new covenant," and the possibility of returning home in every sense of the word.

The same God still speaks hope into chaos today. In a world full of fear, God continues to form resilient communities, call people back to compassion, and plant "a future and a hope" in unexpected places.

When we compare Jeremiah's world with ours, the point is not to say, "Things have never been worse." The point is to say: God's faithfulness does not depend on our circumstances. God was steady then, and God is steady now. In every season—crisis, confusion, or promise—God is still inviting us back into life, truth, and hope.

Jeremiah 33:14-16 New International Version

"'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

"'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 Righteous Savior.'

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

These words were first spoken by Jeremiah into a bleak moment. Jerusalem was surrounded by Babylon, leadership had collapsed, and many wondered if God had abandoned them. Hope seemed unreasonable—yet this is exactly where God plants a promise.

God's promise rests on His faithfulness, not human strength. When God says, "The days are surely coming," He declares that His story is still moving forward, even when everything around us seems to fall apart. Advent begins here—with a God who keeps His word even in the dark.

The "Righteous Branch" is God's quiet, surprising answer. Not a fortress or a crown, but a small green shoot from what looked dead. God often works this way—quietly, slowly, and through things the world overlooks. For Jeremiah, this Branch pointed to a just and merciful king. For us, it points to Jesus, whose coming was humble and unexpected. Advent reminds us that God's salvation often begins small.

Jeremiah promises a king who will bring true justice and peace—healing what is broken and setting right what is wrong. Advent hope is honest about the world's wounds, yet trusts that God is bringing a kingdom where the vulnerable are protected and relationships restored.

"The LORD is our righteousness" is a reminder that righteousness is not something we earn. It is a gift. In Advent we remember we are rooted not by our perfection, but by God's presence and faithfulness. This is the heart of Christmas—God comes close.

Advent invites us to wait with that same hope. As Jeremiah's people waited for the Messiah's first coming, we wait for Christ's return. And in our waiting, we trust that God is still at work: new life is growing, light is shining, and darkness cannot overcome it.

Jeremiah 33:14–16 teaches us that God's promises often become visible in unlikely seasons. Like a shoot pushing through winter soil, God brings hope into places that feel barren. As we begin this Advent season, we

hold these truths; God is faithful, God is near, and in Jesus, “The LORD is our righteousness” has taken on flesh and dwelt among us.

As we wait this season, may we lean into and share God’s promises of hope — just as Red did on the street corners, and Jeremiah did in ancient Jerusalem.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN

Please pray with me.

Gracious God, as we enter this Advent season, help us wait with hope. When the world feels unsettled, remind us that You fulfill Your promises in Your perfect time. Let the Righteous Branch—Jesus Christ—grow Your peace, justice, and righteousness within us. Make us people who carry Your hope into the world, living as signs of the promise You have already begun to keep. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.