**January 2, 2022 Jeremiah 31:7-14**

***Come Home***

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 31:7-14 NRSV

*(7)For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel." (8)See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. (9)With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. (10)Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." (11)For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. (12)They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. (13)Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. (14)I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.*

**Notes:**

1. Most of Jeremiah foretells ***judgment*** and ***wrath***.
   1. The northern kingdom of Israel was ***gone***;
   2. Judah would also be ***destroyed***.
2. We can only understand this as a passage of ***joy*** in the context of the entire book of Jeremiah
   1. We are uncomfortable with the concept of being ***judged***.
   2. The message was of God’s judgment upon ***sin*** and ***wickedness***.
   3. God’s final word is ***redemption***, ***consolation***, and ***joy***.
   4. God’s last word is ***life*** in all its fullness and salvation.
3. Jeremiah is proclaiming God’s promise of ***homecoming***:
   1. God promises that sadness will turn to ***joy*** and exile to ***homecoming***.
   2. God ***sustains*** in every hour, in every pain, sorrow and suffering.
   3. God acknowledges the pain, the suffering, and the weeping, but promises ***consolation***.
   4. God still gives us every ***good*** ***thing***.
   5. God would be the ***Father*** of his people, the ***shepherd*** of his flock.
4. We ***celebrate*** with joy the birth of Jesus,
   1. Through Jesus we too have become God’s ***own*** ***people***.
   2. Those of us who were far off are now called to ***come*** ***near*** to his throne of grace.
   3. Our mourning has not yet turned into ***joy*** or our sorrow into ***gladness***.
   4. The day will come when we will be ***gathered*** together.

**Script:**

Have you ever run into somebody that you are well acquainted with, but forget their names. I did that this past week, I had to be creative in how I addressed them trying to hide the fact that I did not remember their name. Which reminds me of a story of a first grader in a new community; it could have been right here in Bedford County.

A little boy shows up a few days late into the school year; his parents fill out all of the forms and they even followed the instructions to put a nametag around his neck so adults would know who he was. The teacher was used to odd names that are found in our modern culture; names like Nova, Precious, North, Christmas, Easter, Summer, Autumn, but she was startled by the name on the boys tag, “Fruitstand”, but she went with it. All day long she would address him by the name on his tag, “Fruitstand” would you like to color, “Fruitstand” would you like to show me your work, “Fruitstand” it’s time for recess. Finally at the end of the day she said “Now Fruitstand don’t worry about getting home, your parents listed the location where the bus will drop you off on the back of your name tag” and as she flips over the nametag she sees the word, “Anthony.” Anthony or Fruitstand, we may mistake or forget their names, but no one is forgotten or lost, right?

A few years back Disney made a film called Lilo and Stitch. In this film we learned of a Hawaiian word, *Ohana,* which means, family. Or in other words, *No one is forgotten or left behind.* This is also the message of Christianity; no matter what your name is, whether it is “Fruitstand” or “Anthony”, God knows our name, God knows and loves each one of us very much as our heavenly Father. Today’s passage is one of the clearest passages in Scripture about Joy after sorrow, merriment after suffering, homecoming after exile, and being found instead of lost. Stand with me and join me in the reading of Jeremiah 31:7-14.

*Jeremiah 31:7-14 NRSV (7)For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel." (8)See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. (9)With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. (10)Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." (11)For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. (12)They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. (13)Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. (14)I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.*

Like the second part of the book of the prophet Isaiah, this chapter of Jeremiah, is much different from the rest of the prophet’s book. Most of Jeremiah foretells judgment and wrath. The ten northern tribes had already been sent into exile and were lost to history in their Assyrian destruction. The people of Ephraim (which were from the northern kingdom of Israel) are dispersed; the people of Jacob (also from the northern kingdom of Israel) were killed or exiled and lost. The northern kingdom of Israel was gone; nothing remained of it but the battered buildings and the few people who survived.

The message of Jeremiah was that Judah, would also be destroyed and it was. Jerusalem was sacked; the king was blinded and sent to Babylon in exile. Jeremiah himself fled to Egypt. God’s Word is both Law and Gospel. God is not mocked and sin and evil will be avenged. The people of Israel and Judah had sinned. They turned after other gods and followed Baal rather than Yahweh. They mistreated the poor and lowly and neglected God’s Word.

We can only understand this as a passage of joy and gladness in the context of the entire book of Jeremiah – and the first part of the book of Isaiah – which proclaimed God’s Word of judgment upon his people. We are uncomfortable with the concept of being judged and don’t want to hear it either. William Willimon, former preaching professor at Duke University, writes:

*When I was serving a little church in rural Georgia, one of my members had a relative who died… The funeral was in a little hot, crowded, off-brand Baptist church. Well, I had never seen anything like it. They wheeled the coffin in; the preacher began to preach. He shouted, fumed, flailed his arms. “It’s too late for Joe,” he screamed. “He might have wanted to do this or that in life, but it’s too late for him now. He’s dead. It’s all over for him. He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can’t now. It’s over… “But it ain’t too late for you! People drop dead every day. So why wait? Now is the day for decision. Now is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus!” Well,”*continues Willimon,*“it was the worst thing I ever heard. ‘Can you imagine a preacher doing that kind of thing to a grieving family’?” I asked Patsy, my wife, on the way home. “I’ve never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate. I would never preach a sermon like that,” I said. She agreed… “Of course,” she added, “the worst part of all is that what was said is true.”*

The message of the prophets to Israel and Judah was of God’s judgment upon sin and wickedness. It was judgment on those who mistreated the poor, who acted unjustly, who neglected God’s Word. But Isaiah and Jeremiah also spoke the word of grace to those who had been judged and were repentant. God’s final word was not destruction and sorrow but redemption and consolation and joy. God does not forget the covenant made with the ancestors or the promises made with God’s people. God’s last word is life in all its fullness and salvation. No one is forgotten or left behind.

Jeremiah is proclaiming God’s promise of homecoming: *(8)See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here.*

It is a message like that of Isaiah: “*(3)Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. (4)Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."…**(10)And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.’ Isaiah 35:3-4, 10 NRSV”*

God promises that sadness will turn to joy and exile to homecoming. And all people will be part of God’s salvation – those of weak hands and feeble knees, the blind and lame, those with child and those in labor. All are part of God’s family. No one is forgotten or left behind.

Norman Vincent Peale once interviewed Capt. Jeremiah Denton who was a POW in North Viet Nam during the war. He told Dr. Peale that he thought it was good for the prisoners to have experienced what they had. In prison, all human support seemed taken from them. They were forced back to the knowledge that they had only one thing, and that was God. And they found that God sustains. Captain Denton said he was tortured for five days and still couldn’t speak. So he was tortured for another five days. Finally, when he could no longer bear the pain, he said, “Dear Jesus Christ, dear God, take me. Take over. I can’t handle it anymore.” Suddenly he felt flowing over him a blanket of comfort. It covered him and, he explained, “From that minute on, I suffered no more pain. I was as comfortable as though I was sitting in a plush automobile.” It was the mantle of God’s comfort.

Captain Denton came back and told us that God sustains in every hour, in every pain, sorrow and suffering. God sustains and comforts. That is the message of Jeremiah. There is no doubt that pain, suffering, and loss exist; we cannot deny it. In today’s passage, God acknowledges the pain, the suffering, and the weeping but promises consolation. Yes, God sent the people into exile but also proclaims, “*He who scattered Israel will gather him and will keep him as a shepherd a flock*.” Though the people were scattered all over the world; we still do not know what happened to the people of the northern kingdom, Jacob, Ephraim, Israel; God will call them and gather them together and bring his people back to reclaim their land and receive the gifts God was offering.

And God would give them every blessing. God still gives us every good thing. The text includes earthly blessing: *“…they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again.”*

God does not despise the good things of this earth that He has created. God will bless humanity with material blessings but the blessing is also a spiritual blessing of comfort and joy. God would be the father of his people, the shepherd of his flock.

We are still in the midst of the Christmas season. We celebrate with joy the birth of Jesus, God’s Son. We praise God because through Jesus we too have become God’s own people, the sheep of his pasture. God is our heavenly father. Those of us who were far off are now called to come near to his throne of grace. But as noted author, Madeleine L’Engle writes, *“The story of Jesus’ birth has been over sentimentalized until it no longer has the ring of truth and once we’d sentimentalized it, we could commercialize it and so forget what Christmas is really about. [Christmas] should be a time of awed silence, but it has become a season so frantic with stress that the suicide rate mounts alarmingly and for some people death seems preferable to the loneliness and alienation of Christmas.”*

What a terrible thing to think that the birth of our Prince of Peace is celebrated with depression and anxiety and the feeling of loss. There is pain and sorrow, and it is felt perhaps most strongly during this holiday season. We are still waiting for God’s fulfillment. We are still longing for the exiles to come home, for those of weak hands and feeble knees to feel the strength of the Lord. We are still waiting for the maidens to rejoice in the dance and the young men and old men to make merry. Our mourning has not yet turned into joy or our sorrow into gladness. We have not yet marched to Zion or rejoiced on the mountain of the Lord. We await Christ’s coming again to bring the fullness of salvation. The day will come when we will be gathered together, young and old, rich and poor, men and women, Jew and Gentile, ready and able to sing God’s praises for the wondrous things He has done. We will shout for joy and sing praises to the God of our salvation. Not one of us will be lost or forgotten or left behind.