

No One is Lost or Left Behind
The United Church of Broomfield
January 2, 2022

Ephesians 1:3-14 (NRSV)

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

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 [parent] 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.

Jeremiah is the prophet of choice for many when we find ourselves having to live through difficult times and want some trustworthy help in knowing what to think, how to pray, how to carry on. Jeremiah's troubled life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history, the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, followed by the Babylonian Exile. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. And Jeremiah was in the middle of it all, sticking it out, praying and preaching, suffering, and striving, writing, and believing.

For some brief backstory, the ten northern tribes had already been sent into exile and were lost to history in their Assyrian destruction. The people of Ephraim dispersed; the people of Jacob killed or exiled and lost. The northern kingdom of Israel was no more; nothing at all remained.

The message and warnings of Jeremiah was that Judah, the southern kingdom, likewise, would be destroyed and it was. Jerusalem was sacked and the king blinded and sent into exile in Babylon.

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. They neglected God's Word to love and care for one another and creation.

We really can only understand today's passage of joy and gladness in the context of the entire book of Jeremiah which proclaimed God's Word of judgment upon God's people. William Willimon, preaching professor at Duke University, recalls an experience:

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. 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?'" Commenting to his wife on the drive home, Willimon said to her, "I've never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate. I would never

preach a sermon like that," She agreed... "Of course," she added, "the worst part of all is that what was said is true."¹

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 to love. But 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 proclaimed 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 similar message heard in Isaiah, which says:

*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.*

God promises that despite times of trouble and feelings of isolation and despair, 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.

Capt. Jeremiah Denton was a POW in North Vietnam during that war. In an interview he said, 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

¹ (William Willimon, "Take Heed to Yourselves," Christian Century, December 3, 1986, p. 1085-86)

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 enveloped 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.

In pain, sorrow and suffering, God sustains and comforts. That is the message of Jeremiah. There is no denial of pain and suffering and loss. Our text acknowledges the weeping but promises consolation. Yes, God sent the people into exile but also proclaims, “The one who scattered Israel will gather them and will keep them as a shepherd a flock.” Though the people weren’t exiled that far away geographically – this was truly the ends of the earth in ancient understanding, for no one knew or still knows what happened to the people of the northern kingdom, Jacob, Ephraim, Israel – God found them and called them and brought them back to reclaim their land and receive the gifts that God was offering.

And God would give them every blessing. God still gives us every good thing. The text includes earthly blessing:

*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.*

God does not despise the good things of this earth that the Lord God has created. God will bless with material blessings, but the blessing is also a spiritual blessing of comfort and joy in the Lord.

We are still in the Christmas season. We celebrate with joy the birth of Jesus. We praise God because through Jesus we too have become God’s own people, the sheep of God’s pasture. We are God’s. Those of us who were far off are now called to come near the throne of grace. But as Madeleine L’Engle, the noted author 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. It 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 the 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 now at the holidays. 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.

That is the message, the reminder set before us as we start a new year that is hopeful and promising, yet also carries an underpinning of caution and foreboding. It is a message of hope and excitement. A reminder that

the day will come when we will be gathered together, young and old, rich and poor, men and women, Jew and Gentile, able and halted - to sing God's praises for the wondrous things God 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.²

Amen.

² Adapted from "Homecoming" by the Rev. Dr. James D. Kegel.