

Hear the Word

Jeremiah 31:7-14

A young child is crouching over the sand, shovel in hand. Below her sustained yoga like posture—knees bent, head hung low—is a sandcastle.

Hours later, after high tide reaches its height and recedes, the child returns to the beach. Her castle has been reduced to an inexact mound. After a slight sigh, the child strikes her pose again and starts digging, dumping, and packing the wet sand.

We build something beautiful in our minds or with our hands, and we hope our work endures. Then the tide comes in and rolls over us. And yet, hurricane season after hurricane season, trial after trial, setback after setback, we rebuild. It is what we do. It is also what God does.

The prophet Jeremiah writes eloquently of God. Jeremiah 31 is part of a well-known collection of restoration oracles called the Little Book of Consolation (chaps. 30-33). Our scripture in particular reveals God's promise to refashion and rebuild the fractured covenant with the people of Israel. Upon that promise rests Israel's hope for homecoming.

Israel's memory of wandering in the wilderness gives way to the promise of a "straight path" (v. 9). The once murmuring congregation of Israel "shall not stumble" (v. 9) on the stones of complaint but will return with songs of praise. Thirst in the desert will be quenched during this journey by "brooks of water" (v. 9). The journey Jeremiah foresaw moved Israel to the land they knew well enough to call home. **Andrew Nagy-Benson**

The record of the prophet Jeremiah's work and words comes to us from a dramatic and intense time in Israel's history. The figure of Jeremiah himself

was so intense and extraordinary, his words so threatening and frightening, that he was vilified in his own day as a traitor and heretic. Only much later, with several generations' worth of hindsight, could the Judean and Israelite communities see that Jeremiah's harsh words had indeed been both prophetic and accurate—indeed, had been words of love from God himself.

Jeremiah preached and prophesied from about 627 BCE (the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign) to the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BCE. In the reign of Josiah, the mighty Assyrian empire fell. Finally free of this ever-present threat, Judea's national mood took a turn toward a strong religious nationalism. Most of the era's prophets saw this as a good thing, as a return to the faith and practice required by the Lord.

Jeremiah, however, was a lone voice to the contrary. In his view, the new religious nationalism was not righteousness, but self-righteousness. It was not faith, but a self-satisfied arrogance that would eventually lead to worse trouble than before. Those who trusted in themselves and their own righteousness were doomed to follow the same path as the Assyrians, as he made clear in chapter 17: "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD.... Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD" (vv. 5, 7).

In the midst of Jeremiah's warnings and judgments, we come across a short, three-chapter section known as the Book of Consolations. Jeremiah was not a happy or particularly encouraging prophet; he spent forty years trying to warn his people that disaster was coming, and for forty years the only attention he was paid was punishment and hatred. Nevertheless Jeremiah was a true prophet, and a true prophet's function is to speak the words of God. The words of God are ultimately words of love.

For Christians Jeremiah's words, in this Christmas season, offers us a promise of love, redemption, and renewal. Jeremiah saw what was going to happen—defeat and exile—but he also saw that God will not abandon his people. Their punishment would not go on forever, and God would save them both from their enemies and from themselves. It is a pattern that is repeated in every aspect of the life of faith, from Jesus' crucifixion leading to the new life of resurrection, to the periods of decline and apathy that precede a people's vibrant renewal, to the dark and dry periods that precede spiritual consolations for us individually. Nobody wants to hear that pain comes before healing, or darkness before light, or dishonor before glory, but Jeremiah could see that Israel itself was about to begin that cycle again. The grace present in the cycle, as Jeremiah offered in the passage, is the comfort God always gives in the hard times, the promise that when the hard times end, we will be closer to God than we were before.

Jeremiah made a point of proclaiming that even those who could not otherwise be expected to make the journey home will be included, "among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor [or according to some translations, the newborn], together" (v. 8). Jeremiah understood that if things are hard for most people, things are even harder for those whose lives present particular struggles, such as pregnancy or disabled. Jeremiah speaks the hope of God to those who need it most.

Katherine C. Calore

Interestingly, the prophet preached of such a homecoming before the people of Israel left their land. As this book is structured, Babylon's dispersal of Israel loomed ominously on the horizon (chap. 39). Even before the people of Israel fall to the deluge of that foreign foe, the prophet spoke

God's word of reconciliation. God's promise to help them weather the gathering storm.

For Christians, this welcoming embrace of Israel calls to mind the father's forgiveness in Christ's parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15). God's capacity to restore Israel echoes David's Good Shepherd who "restores my soul" (Ps. 23). God sees us as his child, his "firstborn" (v. 9) and "will gather *us*, and will keep *us as* a shepherd a flock" (v. 10). God is both father and shepherd, demonstrating that God cares for us as individuals and as a group. Not only will young women dance and men of every age rejoice, but the most vulnerable members of the flock are important too. According to the prophet's vision of Israel's redemption, the "least" among us are as important as the "greatest" in the economy of God's salvation. This redemption song gives us all reasons to join in the mighty chorus.

As the new year dawns, words of renewal fill the air. God speaks a forgiving word and promises to rebuild and refashion individual lives and communities of faith. Looking through the dim glass, we are witnesses to the power of God's reconciling love in the world. We are witnesses to redemption's "straight path" back to God. We are members of a mighty chorus that fills the air with a song of hope and homecoming. **Andrew Nagy-Benson**

These words remind us of Jesus' own ministry, in which women, children, nor persons with disabilities were not left behind. For now, though, it is still Christmas. Jeremiah tells us that God is faithful and will return the exiles to their homes. At Christmas we know that God did not stop there; he made his home with us, as well, in the presence of Jesus. **Katherine C. Calore**

The joy of this scripture is that we are told to hear the word of God, and we are to share it! As we stand at the beginning of a new year....not knowing what it will hold...we know that God is with us and will bring us through. Comfort each other with these words!

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