

# Joy and Gladness

## Jeremiah 31:7-14

<sup>7</sup> 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."

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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."

<sup>11</sup> For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

Last week I said that Christmas is not your birthday...but we received gifts. Can you remember the best gifts you ever received or is there some special blessing for which you would like to thank God. Let's take a few minutes to share with the congregation ...

In this passage, Jeremiah tells us of the gifts that God gives. Besides joy and gladness we know that God, our shepherd (v. 10) leads his people home

from exile. The image of the Lord as shepherd is certainly an ancient one in Israel's thought (Ps. 23:1, Gen. 49:24). The text comprises a series of remarkable reversals, beginning with Judah as the "chief of the nations" rather than the peon. Not because of our good, intelligence, cleverness, craftiness, righteousness, for the Lord has redeemed us from the grasp of "hands too strong for *us*" (v. 11). But in this instance, as at other moments in history, "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27).

We see not only the reversal of the expected international power relationships and of the physical direction of exile, but also of some of the deeper ills inflicted by exile. For example, one of the most horrific yet common images of a destroyed country (like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, etc.) is that of a violated woman (Lam. 1-2). Here the safe return of childbearing women affirms the possibility of new life for the restored community. The land that was scourged by the assaults of the Mesopotamians will be rich and fruitful again. Many believers and communities experience real exile from home and family, like those in the Middle East, Christians being forced from their ancient homeland, who lost their homes and lives. As Christians we have long pictured ourselves as sojourners in this life, separated from our true homeland with God (see Heb. 11:13-16). Augustine's famous line reflects on this condition: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

The procession homeward depicted by Jeremiah is also a remarkable scene of healing and inclusion. The blind and lame, excluded from coming before God in Leviticus 21:18, are welcomed back to Jerusalem. All, including foreigners are also said to be welcomed to serve God in new and closer ways (Isa. 56:6). This return from exile is envisioned as a new

exodus, with a new "mixed multitude" seeking to reclaim the land in hard times. This scripture says that God is *our* Father (v. 9) who is exceedingly generous in love. Psalm 68:5-6 calls the Lord the "father of orphans," who gives a home to the solitary and abandoned. Our call today is to minister in challenging contexts as we hear Jeremiah's inclusive word as a model; God has often chosen to use those whom humans do not expect. So it was even with Moses (with his speech impediment), David (the youngest son), and Jesus (of lowly birth).

This text also reminds us that "*God* leads me beside still waters"; and now this journey home is "by brooks of water, in a straight path in which *we* shall not stumble" (31:9). Walter Brueggemann has suggested that God does not punish forever, nor has Israel, nor we, abandoned faith in God because of its awful historical experiences. Indeed the proclamation of Israel is very much like that of a psalmist who tells of his suffering at God's hand, only to follow with an account of his healing, and closing with praise: "Declare it in the coastlands far away; say: 'He who scattered...will gather...'" (v. 10), therefore sing with joy.

In Christian understanding the historical deliverance of Israel is like God's spiritual deliverance of believers from sin. So wrote Calvin: "Hence the prophet... describing the spiritual redemption of the believing folk, speaks of them as 'redeemed from the hand of one stronger than they.' By this he surely means the tight fetters with which the sinner is bound so long as...he lives under the devil's yoke." But we who believe in Christ have the rich promises of God. We have deliverance from sin a great blessing. These verses in Jeremiah, depict a restored life of wholeness (*shalom*) and peace in which the entire creation, from fields to flocks to humankind, rejoices in right relationships and therefore flourishes. If sin is wrong relationship to

God and to God's creation, then its absence is not a void but a joyful and harmonious dance.

We don't know what tomorrow or 2016 will bring. However, no matter what we currently experience, as believers we have faith in God's ultimate control of history, despite the sufferings and imperfections of our own times, we have hope and joy and gladness because of what God is doing in our lives. **Christopher B. Hays**

For now, it is still Christmas, and we believe in the fulfillment of God's promises. 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**

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