

Mourning to Joy!

Second Sunday After Christmas Day: 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. **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 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 prophets of that time saw this as a good thing, as a return to the faith and practice required by the Lord.

In this passage, the shepherd God leads God's people home from exile in the north, in Babylon. They are given a series of remarkable reversals: Judah was small,

weak and in exile, but God says with God's redemption and strength Israel was the "chief of the nations;" rather than women being violated, God will provide 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 would be rich and fruitful again. People in Jeremiah's time were not the only exiles; many believers and communities experience real exile from home and family, like those from New Orleans who lost their homes to Hurricane Katrina. As Christians we picture ourselves as sojourners as we journey through this life, separated from their true homeland with God. Augustine's famous line reflects on this condition: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." **Christopher B. Hays**

Jeremiah, however, was a lone (if loud) 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, whose hearts turn away from the LORD.... Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD."

In the midst of Jeremiah's warnings and judgments, we come across a short, three-chapter section (chaps. 30, 31, and 33, interrupted by a short chapter of prose narrative). This section is so unique and such a unit unto itself that it has come to be known as the Book of Consolations. Jeremiah is not a happy or particularly encouraging prophet; he spends 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 is 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.

This Book of Consolations includes some of the Bible's most beloved passages and verses. "I have loved you with an everlasting love" ([31:3](#)) and "I will turn their

mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for their sorrow" (31:13) are two examples. This is also a section in which us Christians recognize prophetic words that have come to be associated with the life of Jesus: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children, and she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more" (31:15). "In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land" (33:15).

These echoes tie Jeremiah's words to the Christmas season. Jeremiah offers God's people a promise of love, redemption, and renewal. He saw what was going to happen—defeat and exile—but he also saw that God would 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 individual believers. 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 offers 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.

On this second Sunday of Christmas, Jeremiah 31:7-14, evokes the theme of homecoming; the exiles returning, and the homeland prospering. The birth of Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of these promises of homecoming and restoration. Jeremiah proclaims that the Lord will "bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth" (v. 8), and that "with weeping they shall come, and with consolations God will lead them back" (v. 9). Demonstrating God's own

compassion, Jeremiah makes a point of proclaiming that even those who could not otherwise be expected to make the journey will be included, "among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, 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 disabilities. Again Jeremiah speaks the hope of God to those who need it most.

In some ways these words evoke Jesus' own ministry, in which neither women, children, nor those with disabilities were left behind. For now, though, it is still Christmas, and the emphasis remains upon 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; God made God's home with us, as well, in the presence of Jesus. **Katherine C. Calore**

As the new year dawns, words of renewal fill the air. God speaks a forgiving word and promises the return of God's children. God plans 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, and God turns our songs of morning into songs of joy. **Andrew Nagy-Benson**

God turned the Israelites' mourning into joy! As God is the same yesterday, today and forever, and through Jesus, God has and will turn our mourning into joy! Thanks be to God!

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