

### Jeremiah 31: 7-14, John 1: 10-18 - Home Is Where Our God Is

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.' 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. 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.

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.' For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. 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.

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. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

When we greet each other Happy New Year, as we have for a few days now, we wish for them a pleasant, healthy, peaceful year, filled with love of friends and family, *free* of hardships like pain, suffering, and loss of all kinds. We do this with all sincerity, while knowing full well that the hardships *are part* of the reality of our very human lives, of our *life in flesh*, along *with* happiness and joy.

Perhaps because we know *in our bones*, even at the height of our happiness and in the moments of our deepest joy, how hard life *can* be, or perhaps because it *has* been for you, or for your loved ones, in the year that has just passed, we wish for each other all the more, a simply happy new year.

But there might be more... Beneath that hopeful wishing for a happy new year, if we *still* the festive noises and holiday cheers and get to a quiet place in our hearts and *listened*, we may hear a murmur, a longing for something deeper, something more solid, something more lasting, something we can count on, something like... God, who comes to meet us in the midst of the hardest challenges of our "life in flesh," in our hopes and fears of all the years. In our heart of hearts, we long to be in God's presence.

Well, these words of Prophet Jeremiah Rose Marie just read for us tell us that the feeling is mutual, between God and us, though God is far clearer about God's longing for us than we tend to be about our longing for God. God is always a better lover, faithful and true.

Jeremiah brought these words of comfort from God, gushing with love and compassion, to the people of Israel who had been scattered among the foreign powers and had fallen on hard times. Those words were also for the remnant of Israel, who were about to face an uncertain future, losing their land and losing their identity as a nation.

Prophets in the Bible typically point out that Israel fell into their demise because they made bad political choices, instead of trusting God and follow God's way. In fact, in the first half of the book, Jeremiah is busy dishing out God's judgment against the people of Israel who have failed God time and again. In this, Israel mirrors for us the pattern all of us fall into.

When we get ourselves in trouble out of our own ignorance or by the stubbornness of our own will, it sure frustrates God who only wants the best for us, not just for us individually but in the larger scheme of God's will for the world, in which all things work together. We often operate out of our vision limited by our self-interest, for our self-protection and self-preservation, as an individual and as a nation, but God's will is far broader and comprehensive. We, with our limited vision, get in the way of God's ever perfect, trustworthy will.

And yet, Jeremiah's words reveal how it is God's compassion that governs God's will, no matter how much we the people let God down. Moved by compassion, God promises to gather the weakened and vulnerable together with the rest and save them from the abuser, and perhaps from themselves. Our God is a God who keeps reaching out and calls us back to come home to God's bountiful care, to live as a member of God's household where all thrive, lacking nothing.

In this passage, through the words of Jeremiah, we have a glimpse of God who, in the heart of hearts, longs to be with us, to love. Then, in fullness of time, as if God could no longer stand to have to rely on prophets, as if God could not bear to see us suffer in ignorance of God's love, compassion, and grace, God chose to come into the world to be the God with Us, our Immanuel, the God who made home in us. Hear now, the Gospel.

John 1: 9-18

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') From

his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Last week, we heard from Luke, who is the only Gospel writer to tell us a story of the boy Jesus. We saw how Jesus, even as a child, had a sense that he belonged to God the Father, even before he belonged to his earthly parents. Apparently, he saw no tension or contradiction in calling God his Father, even while he was an obedient son of his mother Mary and his father Joseph. He embraced these 2 ways of being quite naturally: one defined who he was in God, and the other, who he was in the world.

Today, we heard from John, who is the only Gospel writer to tell us the story of Jesus before he was born a babe of Mary. The story of Jesus as the Word of God, who was in the beginning with God, who was God, and through whom all things came into being.

And this God is the same God who has been pouring out Love and Compassion and calling us back to come home to God through the prophets of old, like Jeremiah, the same God who gave the Law through Moses so the people can know and live according to God's will for them, to live in harmony with God and with one another.

The world we live in, came to *be* through the Word and belongs to God. "He came to what was his own," John writes. When the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus, he did not come to an unfamiliar place. He came to what was his own, to make it his home alongside us, to bring us home. But the people did not accept him they did not see God in the world, they didn't see the world as God's. We took the world, this sacred thing that came into being through God, and treated as if we owned it. God sent Jesus to bring us back to God, and we did to him as we pleased.

I mentioned to you before this notion of "thin place," in the Celtic spirituality, where the veil separating the sphere of human existence and the spiritual real feels especially "thin." I've also talked about "axis mundi," a concept found in many religions about a place that is an access point, a portal to the realm of the gods, where humans can meet the divine.

They speak to that longing we have for God, our hope and prayer that our world is not totally abandoned by God, though we may feel so separated from wherever God is. Many have resorted to the idea that Heaven, the home of God, is our eternal home where we go only after we are done with this world.

But that is not good enough for God. God so loved the world God came and made the home with us and in us, so we are never home-less. Home is where our God is, and our God came to meet us in Jesus, so we are always at home even in this transient, temporary world where all is not well. Those of us who have been led to trust that Jesus is Christ, have been made the children of God and recognize, this world, too, is God's home.

We have seen God's grace in Jesus and have become God's children, so we too can show God's grace to those around us. So, what is ours to do? We are called to reflect God's grace and make this world a safe home for all who live in it. We can start with a neighbor. We have seen in Jesus that God is gracious like that. And as God's children, so will we *also* be. God's children will work to create a community that reflects God's compassionate care. God's children will work to shape a nation to become a welcoming home, safe and secure for all, especially for those who are heavy laden, like Jeremiah told us God would.

Tomorrow is Epiphany, when the church marks the coming of the Light into the whole world, the true light that enlightens everyone. Can we carry the Light into this year? A Happy New Year, everyone.