

# 1/02/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

NOTE: OUR IN-PERSON WORSHIP SERVICE WAS CANCELLED DUE TO INCLEMENT WEATHER.

SERMON – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Jeremiah 31:7-17

## God's Hope

Happy New Year! Today is the first Sunday after Christmas – the day when many churches celebrate Epiphany. Epiphany comes from the Greek epiphaneia which means appearance or manifestation. It refers to the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world – it's the day when we celebrate the magi coming to worship Jesus, which represents the understanding that Jesus came not only for his own Jewish people, but his good news was for everyone – the Persian magi, the Samaritans, the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the whole world! Epiphany is often associated with the stars, and light, because the magi followed the bright light of the star to find Jesus. And often, the sermon text for Epiphany would come from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 2 or John, chapter 1. But in keeping with our Old Testament, prophetic series through Advent and Christmas, I decided to look at this passage from Jeremiah this morning.

Once again, we join the people of God in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, BCE. We're familiar with the scenario. They've been exiled and forcefully repopulated, this time by the Assyrians. Their homes lost, their land taken, their traditions destroyed or appropriated by foreign traditions. The prophetic words of the promises of restoration, healing and return to their homeland are as yet unfulfilled. They are still foreigners in a foreign land, scattered to many foreign lands; they are refugees, longing to go home. They are people who have suffered unspeakable losses and they are grieving yet – for more than a century after Judah had been destroyed. This is the story – we hear it over and over again... the people are unfaithful to God's covenant, they lose their way, they follow Baal and many other gods, the prophets proclaim their warnings, they beg the people, on God's behalf, to repent, turn around, remember the covenant, live out God's commands – love God, love your neighbors, care for the orphans and the widows, steward the earth, do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with God. But the people forget. They get distracted. Sometimes they willfully disobey. They suffer the consequences. There is loss, grief, distress. God's people cry out, God hears their cries, and like a loving parent, allows them to suffer the consequences of their decisions, invites them to repent and then to seek and create restoration. God always sends light to the people's darkness, healing to the brokenness and God always sends hope into the midst of grief.

This is the message from Jeremiah, in chapters 30-33. This small section is often referred to as the "Book of Comfort" in the middle of Jeremiah's otherwise pretty discomfoting words. But, true to form, God's hope is a little different, a little "upside-down" relative to what the culture tries to describe or offer as hope. And these thousands of years later, we still find truth and

gospel – good news – in the words of God’s prophets, and specifically these words from the prophet Jeremiah. So let’s take a closer look at some ways we, in 2022 can find and understand God’s hope for our lives and our world. Here are some of the highlights of these verses that I think can transcend the centuries since they were written.

In verse 7 we read about the remnant – the righteous leftovers. The remnant is those who have survived difficult circumstances and are returning or reaching out to God, who has been waiting for them the whole time. It’s the idea that God remains faithful even when people aren’t. So, when the people come around and remember the covenant, God is there, with the remnant.

In verse 8 we learn that “the great company”, that is, the faithful remnant, is all-inclusive. The blind, the lame, children, pregnant women... it seems that God’s great company includes the most vulnerable. There may be some of the most strong and mighty, trophy-winning specimens among them too, but they are not mentioned. It’s important to notice who’s mentioned. God expects the kinds of folks who are on the margins, who often get lost in the shuffle to be included, to be accommodated and cared for – they are an important part of God’s great company. It’s a great company, not a company of the great. No human leaders are mentioned. God is their leader.

On the journey, there will be weeping. We often associate weeping with sadness or grief which, of course, is true! But sometimes we weep for joy. Sometimes we weep with the realization of God’s incredible love and commitment to humanity. We’re not told in verse 9 exactly why there will be weeping, only that there will be. Weeping indicates vulnerability – a position conducive to following God’s lead and receiving God’s consolation.

Then in verse 10 comes the proclamation – “Hear the word of the Lord, O nations!” The Hebrew word that’s been translated into Greek is *go-yim* – Gentiles! The word of the Lord is for everyone!

In verse 11 we read that God has done two things for Jacob (another word for Israel) – ransomed and redeemed. Redemption means bringing liberty to a captive, usually through the payment of a ransom. So these are two separate, but related actions that God has taken on behalf of his people.

Verse 12 says they will sing in the height of Zion! Zion is the mountain on which Jerusalem is built. It’s important to remember here that these folks have been in exile for a *long* time – most of them have never seen Jerusalem. But they know about it, they’ve been told by their forebears what it was like, how grand and beautiful it was. So the opportunity to go there would, indeed, inspire singing and great joy.

The promise of singing is followed by the promise of flourishing rather than languishing. God will provide an abundance of what they need, their lives will be like a watered garden, there will be dancing and celebrating, the young and the old together. Their mourning will become joy and in their sorrow, God will comfort them.

And then, in verse 15, in the midst of this description of joy and celebration, their very real lamentation is heard by God. The voice of ancestor Rachel is weeping and wailing for the children who were killed by the empire. The pain and the grief cannot – must not be denied, and yet God promises hope for the future, the hope that other generations of children will return home in safety. The idea of home encompasses a sense of security, belonging, contentment, peace.

Here at Alexanderwohl, we obviously can't draw a straight line between ourselves and the Hebrew exiles in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE! But perhaps there are some symbolic parallels.

Are there ways in which we who continue to gather here for worship can sometimes feel like a remnant? I can't count the number of times I've heard people wistfully say things like, "Oh, my... we used to have 500 or more here on a Sunday morning. You could hardly find a seat. They would line folding chairs across the back. The Sunday school classrooms were bursting and there were large numbers of children in each grade. We've lost so many." Let me be careful here. I don't mean to say that WE are the "righteous leftovers"! But I'm suggesting that we have felt the pain of brokenness and loss. Can we acknowledge that? We have experienced hurt and grief and loss in the last months. We have lost some to death, we have lost some to divisive politics, some have become disillusioned or realized that their commitment was to something other than what happens here. We have lost some to our collective inability or fear of simply talking to one another. People that some of us have gone to church with for decades have simply left without so much as saying goodbye. And we have not been able to reach out to them and ask, "why?" This is painful! And it is cause for weeping. One of the things we can learn from Jeremiah is that part of finding God's hope is to weep. This is quite different than what we're often told about being hopeful. We hear things like, Chin up! Stiff upper lip! Just move on. When we weep we're honest, we're vulnerable, we're in a better position to remember and honor God's covenant. When we can name and own our losses it's easier to be reminded that we need God, that God is faithful and here, with us. We're in a position of humility, conducive to following God's lead and receiving God's consolation.

Another point we can take from Jeremiah is to remember that we are part of God's great company – the faithful remnant that is all-inclusive. Let's be diligent and deliberate about welcoming those who are on the margins, who often get lost in the shuffle perhaps because they're different. What if we push that out even a little further...The magi, the go-yim, the feared and hated Assyrians and Babylonians – who are they for us? Those whose beliefs and traditions are different than ours? Those on the other side of the political aisle? Those who speak a different language or have dark skin or express their love in different ways? These are all included in God's great company – it is for all of them (for all of US) that the light shines and leads to Jesus. What do we have to learn from these "others"? How can we be God's great company with them?

What does it look like for us at Alexanderwohl to be ransomed and redeemed? Again, we must assume a position of humble confession in order to consider this question. We must

acknowledge that we are held captive by something or someone. This admission flies in the face of our pride, our strong individualism and fierce sense of independence – perhaps that’s the very thing we’re bound by? Whatever is binding us, preventing us from coming to God with our needs, we find God’s hope more easily when we drop our defenses, acknowledge our need for God and embrace with our whole hearts, minds and souls the truth that only God can ransom and redeem us – not we, ourselves.

Unlike the exiles of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, we are not refugees. We have homes, we have abundance, we have *so much*. Perhaps this over-abundance could also be something from which we need to be ransomed and redeemed? But the longing for “home”, the sense of security, of being accepted and loved, of knowing that we are created in God’s image and cared for deeply – this is a human need, felt more or less keenly, depending on many factors in a person’s life. Maybe it’s not too far a stretch to imagine that in this time of uncertainty and transition, we are longing for a sense of “home”. As we ask questions together like, “Who are we now at Alexanderwohl, as a group of 150 rather than 500?”, “How is God calling us to minister with the combination of gifts that we bring now, in this time and circumstance?”, “What changes will need to be made in how we do and be church together in order to be fully faithful?” it’s more important than ever to humbly open ourselves to the leading of God’s Holy Spirit and to seek it together.

As we move into the year of our Lord, 2022, let us prepare ourselves to follow the light that leads to Jesus. Let’s sing and dance on the journey as we celebrate God’s faithfulness, remembering that same faithfulness to our forebears in years gone by, being attentive to the joy and the sorrows that are real for us in the present and looking ahead with faithful anticipation of the new challenges and experiences God might have for us!

The words of hymn number 278 are new – just written in 2004. They offer us the prophet’s words as well as a prayer to the Prince of Peace in song...

A voice was heard in Ramah that could not be consoled,  
as Rachel wept for children she could no longer hold.  
For Herod ruled the nation, yet feared the infant king.  
How great the devastation that fear and anger bring!

O God, we hear the crying for little ones of yours;  
for many still are dying in conflicts and in wars –  
in ev’ry troubled nation, on ev’ry violent street,  
how great the lamentation where fear and anger meet!

O Prince of Peace, you lead us in ways of truth and grace.  
May we be brave to practice your peace in ev’ry place –  
to love each fear-filled nation, to serve each troubled street.  
How great the celebration when peace and justice meet!