

Sermon for January 5, 2025

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Jeremiah 31:7-14   Psalm 147:12-20   Ephesians 1:3-14   John 1:10-18

### Grace Upon Grace

By the time we have slogged through 29 chapters of Jeremiah we need a reprieve from this prophet of doom and lamentation. For 28 chapters he describes Israel's final days. Soon, Israel will cease to exist, overtaken by the powerful kingdom of Babylon.

This is a threshold moment when Israel must leave behind their promised land, must see Jerusalem destroyed, and enter the long march to Babylon. This is a nation on the brink of disaster, going into exile, leaving behind their thousands of dead, their ruined Temple, their burned city, their wasteland of abandoned fields and farms. This is a people who, for their unfaithfulness to God, will walk to Babylon, many in chains, all beaten down, believing God has forsaken them.

It's pretty stern stuff until we come to chapters 30 and 31, a section of Jeremiah called, The Book of Consolation. Here God speaks through Jeremiah of a time to come, a time when God will lead the people back. In that day, writes Jeremiah, they will walk by brooks of water, when they will be radiant, be nourished by grain and wine and oil; when they will once more tend their young flocks and never languish again. It will be a time when God will turn their mourning into joy, writes Jeremiah.

These ancient events and the words of consolation offered to the exiles can still speak to us thousands of years later. We need to hear them as we stand on the threshold of our own perilous times. We need to remember that generations

before us have been caught up in these nation-ending, empire-destroying times. Even Babylon would later be crushed by the armies of Persia. Jeremiah foresees that some Israelites would survive, a remnant, he calls them, these grandchildren of the original exiles. They would return to rebuild. But, he warns, repentance will be needed; it is the key to human survival. Not power. Not armies. But humility; and repentance for Israel's refusal to trust their God.

Those who did return from Babylon did rebuild and even thrived for a time, a long time, until they came under Roman rule. We know the stories of the oppressive Empire in Jesus' time. It required high taxes, back-breaking labour to produce food, military service to keep the Empire thriving. Jesus tried to teach his disciples what was coming, including his own life crushed by Empire and by his own people. But it was a hard lesson, one learned only as Israel was once more defeated in the year 70 C.E. The city was smashed, the Temple buried and ruined but for one wall which still stands, the wailing wall some call it. The people were sent all over the Empire, to Asia, Egypt, Syria and all around the Mediterranean, some even ending up in India. One empire rises and another falls.

John's gospel was written in Ephesus, modern day Turkey, some 20 or so years after the fall of Jerusalem and the exile. These early Christians lived in small groups, perhaps small enough to gather for worship in private homes, small enough to escape notice by the Empire. It was a time of terrible persecution of Christians. The good news from John to these clusters of Jesus followers was expressed right at the beginning of chapter 1, today's text. Here John, like Jeremiah, offers consolation, declaring his most important good news using the image of Jesus as the true light of the world. He writes that Jesus came to his own

and they did not receive him, did not believe he was the Son of God. But to the ones who did receive him: they were to be called the children of God.

Because they were so few and so vulnerable, John describes in story after story, the gathering of followers, strategies for protecting them, and teaching them how to live in opposition to Roman rule and culture, right under their noses. They were to become an anti-society, often meeting in secret, with their own coded language, devoted to the way of Jesus.

There is something important here for us two centuries later, gathering in groups large and small to consider how we are to live in ways different from the culture of the world around us. Especially in North America we see our numbers dwindling, our churches closing. At the same time we see the wider world on a downward trend. None of us will ever be as prosperous and free as we are right now. We may not see ourselves marched in chains from our rather comfortable way of life but we know some of what lies ahead as we try to survive a climate crisis. We have the community of our church to speak with, to share our fears and to imagine what it will take to survive the coming years.

It won't be easy. We know whole species are threatened with extinction. We read daily of people leaving their homes where drought or floods or wars are making life impossible. We want to offer sanctuary and we do, but we're speaking of millions on the move to Europe and to North American. They are hungry and often sick. They want housing and they want their children to be educated. Do our ancient Scriptures show a way forward? Might we think specifically about those people John's gospel was shaping into communities of resistance to the prevailing powers?

If we believe what Brian McLaren has to say in his book, Life After Doom – and none of us want to believe that climate change is about more than crazy weather – then we know we are facing a perilous future. Yet we are not the first civilization to die completely. It could happen to us. It happened to Greece and Rome and the Mayans. Some would say the First Nations right here in Canada also suffered that fate or something near to it with colonization. Should any of our species survive, it may be in small groups in far-flung places. It might be like the remnant who made it back from Babylon to begin again. Or like those Christians with John in Ephesus finding new life together. This is why we need to do our best to leave a legacy to our grandchildren and their grandchildren. We know a little of what keeps us going through hard times and what that legacy might be.

Here's a personal story. On Christmas Eve, our son, having been raised in the church but now a determined atheist, came to the service here. He came to hear his niece and his nephews sing and play the harp. Sitting near him, I sometimes noticed he wasn't singing the hymns.

The next day, his sister asked why he was, at some moments in that service, laughing and shaking his head. His answer? He said, I was thinking what? People still do this? With everyone busy getting the Christmas meal ready, with the noise and excitement of an extended family gathering, it wasn't a time to ask him more about that.

But I keep thinking, yes, people still do this. We gather in this space. We sing the great songs of our faith, the Christmas carols. We even sing the last carol, Silent Night, from memory in our circle of candles, lights out. We tell once

more the ancient story of a poor family finding no room to stay in Jerusalem, no place in which to give birth. And finally Mary giving birth in a cattle shed. And shortly after, having to flee to another country to find sanctuary. Yes, we still do this. On Sundays we pray for others – the poor and homeless, the ones pushed aside, the ones fleeing their homelands, their future unknown. On some Sundays, we share the bread and offer the wine as we gather for an ages-old ritual we call communion. We still do this! We experience a little of that anti-society life John describes in his gospel and renew our pledge to follow in the way of Christ. We remember the One who shows the way to life to be not the way of power or prestige, of tyrants and armies, but the way of compassion, the way of love through suffering. John writes: “From Christ’s fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” Amen.

Offering