

# The Gladness Beyond the Sorrow

*“I will turn their mourning into joy,  
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.” Jeremiah 31:13*

The Reverend Luther Zeigler  
St. Paul Lutheran Church, Gloucester, MA

We took our Christmas tree down early this year, on the fifth day of Christmas. This may not seem newsworthy to you, but it is a bit of a scandal in our household. I tend to be a purist when it comes to observing the Christmas season. And to purists, the tree cannot come down until the Feast of the Epiphany at the earliest, when the twelve days of Christmas are officially over.

At least that has been my practice in years past. But this year is not like other years, is it? So, why did we toss out our tree prematurely?

The practical consideration was that our tree this year was in fact becoming a fire hazard. It stopped drinking water from the stand somewhere around December 15, and by Christmas Day, its needles were just barely hanging on for dear life. The reason for this is simple: we put the tree up unusually early this year. And we did so, because, like many people, we had the pandemic blues. In late November, on the heels of an anemic celebration of Thanksgiving, we were overcome by an urgent need to try to jumpstart the joy of the holiday season by getting a tree and some wreaths to dress up the house.

The problem is, when you put the tree up early, it inevitably peters out early. And so it did.

But, truth be told, that is not the only reason the tree came down when it did. If I'm being honest, we also took it down early because our enthusiasm for celebrating Christmas this year just ran out of gas; and our tree sitting in the middle of an empty living room, quietly blinking, came to be a sad symbol of this year's diminished holiday season.

Usually, you see, during the twelve days of Christmas, Pat and I would be hosting lots of dinner parties and other gatherings in the Parsonage, with streams of visitors stopping by. The house would be abuzz with unrestrained festivity. Smells of cookies baking in the oven would fill the air, Handel's Messiah would be

playing in the background, with maybe a game of touch football happening in the yard.

But most importantly, there would be people, lots of flesh-and-blood human beings, crowding into the house. There would be laughter, hugging, even kissing under the mistletoe. We would most certainly all be closer than six feet apart. And anyone wearing a mask would be laughed right out of the house.

But not this year. This Christmas has been so very different. I'm guessing your holiday experience may have been similar. This year's Christmas season is spare, stripped down, quiet, even mournful.

All of us, I think, are grieving what we have lost these past nine months, most especially physical connection with other people. And perhaps we notice these losses even more acutely this time of year when we are accustomed to being embraced by the love of family, friends, and church.

And so the question becomes, what can sustain us during this time of isolation, dislocation, and exile? To where do we turn?

One consistently reliable anchor for me is the Word. For the one thing that Scripture teaches us time and again is that whatever challenge we may be facing, whatever loss we may be feeling, or pain we may be suffering, God's people have been here before, and God's faithful presence has carried them through it.

This morning our Bible gives us an unlikely source of Christmas hope in the voice of the prophet Jeremiah. I say 'unlikely' because Jeremiah is usually reserved for penitential times of year, when we need to hear a bellowing baritone of judgment and wrath. If you've ever read Jeremiah from start to finish, you know what I mean. He is for the most part a prophet of doom and gloom. Suffice it to say that the word 'jeremiad' in English – which means a doleful and thunderous denunciation – comes from his name.

And yet, Jeremiah had another, softer side. Tucked discreetly inside his voluminous writings are four inspiring chapters, often called the 'Book of Consolations,' and our Old Testament lesson today is taken from this little book.

The historical context for these verses is important. Jeremiah was presented with one of the greatest crises in the history of the Hebrew people: the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 B.C., and the people's displacement from their home in Judah to Babylon; what we now call "the Babylonian exile." This

experience of exile presented a terrifying crisis of faith for God's people because they felt abandoned by a God who had always been by their side.

For generations, the Israelites recounted their foundational narrative of a God who had led them out of captivity in Egypt, through the wilderness, to the Promised Land. Then, through the person of Moses, God had given them the Law as a moral guide, and through their Kings, especially David and Solomon, they worked hard to erect a great temple in Jerusalem where they could worship their God and enjoy a measure of political stability and security.

Yet now, in Jeremiah's era, that Temple was in ruins, the holy city leveled, and the people were once again scattered, displaced and imprisoned. Many were killed in the siege. In their loneliness and isolation, the people understandably began to question their God and fell into a deep and prolonged despair. Whatever suffering these past nine months of pandemic have caused for us – and it has been quite painful to be sure – our very limited experience of exile pales in comparison to the several decades of physical dislocation and oppression Jeremiah's people endured.

And even so, in the midst of all this bleakness, speaking through Jeremiah, in our lesson today God gives the people a vision of a new day and fresh hope. "Sing aloud with gladness," Jeremiah says, for the Lord will gather the people up once again and restore our beloved community.

"I am going to bring 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. . . 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. . . . 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.'"

This was God's promise 2700 years ago to His people in the deserts of Judah, and this is God's promise to us today.

But there is more; so much more. For what Jeremiah did not fully understand in his time, was that God's plan for saving his people would not end with a mere promise of better days ahead. No, God's love of his beleaguered people would not rest until he offered them His own flesh and blood Son to dwell among them, to restore their brokenness, to heal them, and to offer them a new way of being human. As the evangelist John puts it so memorably in today's gospel text, "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."

What we have to sustain us in our own time, then, is not just the biblical memory of God's people surviving prior periods of exile, and the consoling words of great prophets like Jeremiah; what we have is the living Word itself, God become human in Jesus, who is present every time two or three of us gather in his name, just as he is present with us right here, right now. And while we cannot physically cling to one another in this particular moment of social isolation, we can still cling to Jesus.

Martin Luther King, Jr., who knew a thing or two about suffering and exile, would always turn to his favorite hymn at times like this. If I could sing worth a damn, I would. But instead, let me just recall for you the very real and very raw words of Tommy Dorsey's great gospel hymn:

Precious Lord, take my hand,  
 Lead me on, let me stand,  
 I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;  
 Through the storm, through the night,  
 Lead me on to the light:

Take my hand, precious Lord,  
 Lead me home.

When my way grows drear,  
 Precious Lord, linger near,  
 When my life is almost gone,  
 Hear my cry, hear my call,  
 Hold my hand lest I fall:

Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.

When the darkness appears  
And the night draws near,  
And the day is past and gone,  
At the river I stand,  
Guide my feet, hold my hand:

Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.

Amen.