

“Homecoming”

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

Calvin and Hobbes Comic for New Year’s!

“Are you making any resolutions for the new year?”

“Yeah, I am resolving to just wing it and see what happens.”

“So, you are staying the course.”

“I stick to my strengths.”

Too often I think this is us. Winging it and waiting to see what happens. Sometimes, that is all we can do, but sometimes is not all the time. The truth is we all have a strength greater than ourselves and greater than chance. Our greatest strength for this new year, for any resolution we might attempt, for our lives, is God. And I am not just saying that because we find ourselves at church worshipping God today. I am saying that because it is true. Whatever resolution we have set for ourselves in this new year, I want to encourage us to include and be intentional about:

**opening our hands to God’s hands,
opening our ears and listening to God’s sometimes still quiet voice,
opening our hearts and trusting in where God is calling us to go,
and taking a breath resting in God’s hope.**

Our greatest strength for this new year, for our lives, is God. On the journey, when someone asks us how we are making it or what is our secret, nothing could be more powerful than giving all the credit to where the credit is due. Our answer: God.

In studying our scriptures for today, which are the lectionary texts for this Second Sunday after Christmas, I became enamored with the themes behind the lot. The more I read them and sat with them, the more they awakened me. The more they awakened me, the more I wondered if we all would feel the same.

I have long wondered what the impact of scripture would be on us if we spent more energy digging and getting a full perspective of a text rather than touch a part of a text and move on. I have come to find that there are multiple messages embedded in a scripture passage or parable or story, however, we often just pick one, wing it, and see what the scriptures for the next week has for us. For example, chapter 31 in Jeremiah is full of the good news of God. It would be an injustice to this text to try to preach all the themes within it in one sitting. Just in the verses we read, themes such as remembrance, renewal, restoration, redemption,

refashion, reconciliation, resurrection, rebirth, reorientation, repetition, recognition, reassurance, reaffirmation, revelation, recreation, reunion, reverence, rebuilding, returning, and rejoicing stand out. Each of these themes demand attention in our spiritual journey and one Sunday is not enough to allow them to sink in.

Keeping these themes in mind, **I want to invite you on a journey with me over the next several weeks to dig deeper into this text and see where God leads us. We might get to all the themes and we might not. Unlike Calvin and Hobbes, we will not be winging it because we will be grounded in God's good news and our strength to endure will come from God. Our common text will be Jeremiah 31:7-14 but I am certain other texts like Psalm 147, Ephesians 1 and John 1 will have their moment in the supporting role.**

**I just got word that this mission will self-destruct in 10 seconds.
Will we accept our mission?... (Affirmative) That's Awesome!!!**

One of the main story lines of the Bible is the story of exile and return home. God has come to us, but God has done so for the purpose of bringing us back home to Godself.

As Christians, that is believers and followers of Christ's way as our Lord and Savior, we are characters in this story line. That means you have been in exile. We all have. We were born there. We grow up and we find that things in the world are not quite right. We also find that we are not quite right. We might believe in God or we might be full of questions, but either way we know we are not at peace with ourselves or our world. God is never far away from anyone of us, yet we manage to ignore God, try to live without God, and even actively fight against God. In short, we are in exile. But... *there is that word again*... somehow, someway, God pursues us and finds us. It really is not so much that we return to God (for that would be giving us a lot of credit) as that God seeks us out, calls us and get this... brings us back home.

Maybe you have thought, like me, who the lost sheep is in the parable where the shepherd leaves the 99 to go find the one. Maybe you have thought, like me, who the lost boy is, or the older brother, in the parable of the prodigal son.

Think about it. We read stories throughout the Bible of God sending Angels as messengers. The institutional office of priest as mediator was established upon calling the nation of Israel into a covenant relationship. Prophets were called to serve God by bringing God's messages to the people and Kings were anointed and placed in power to be subject to God's laws and not be a law unto themselves. Through each of these, God has sought and called. Still, God's people remained distant and exiled. And still, God did not give up. The good news of the gospel for us today is that God did not and does not give up. God sent Jesus to be the Messiah and true fulfillment of all the angels, priests, prophets, and kings. Why? To bring us back home.

The Isaiah texts we often read and encounter in Advent are about Israel's vindication, her exiles returning, and the homeland prospering. The Epiphany texts we encounter after the 12 days of Christmas speak of sons and daughters returning to their rightful home. Right in the middle then, the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of these promises of homecoming and restoration. What this reveals to us is that Christ is the way home. Christ is our way home.

As Jeremiah proclaims in verse 8 that the Lord will "bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth" we celebrate the theme of homecoming. Jeremiah is in touch with reality, as what he sees all around him is defeat and exile, but what he holds fast to is his faith that God will not abandon God's people. Jeremiah's proclamation of homecoming illuminates the promises of God's love, redemption, and renewal.

Chapter 31, part of a section of Jeremiah's book referred to as the Book of Consolations, goes on with the good words and comfortable words for the encouragement of the captives, assuring them that God would in due time restore them or their children to their own land, and make them a great and happy nation again, especially by sending them the Messiah, in whose kingdom and grace many of these promises were to have their full accomplishment.

Jeremiah prophecies, "They shall be restored to peace and honor, and joy and great plenty (v. 1-14). Their sorrow for the loss of their children shall be at an end (v. 15-17). They shall repent of their sins, and God will graciously accept them in their repentance (v. 18-20). They shall be multiplied and increased, both their children and their cattle, and not be cut off and diminished as they had been (v. 21-30). God will renew his covenant with them, and enrich it with spiritual blessings (v. 31-34). These blessings shall be secured to theirs after them, even to the spiritual seed of Israel for ever (v. 35-37). As an earnest of this the city of Jerusalem shall be rebuilt (v. 38-40)."

These exceedingly great and precious promises were firm foundations of hope and full fountains of joy to the poor captives; and we also may apply them to ourselves and mix faith with them.

I do not know about you all, but all what Jeremiah is saying here is music to my ears. The restoration of peace and honor and joy. Grief and sorrow, particularly for our loss of a child or parent or sibling or friend, are met with comfort and hope. Our wrongs are wiped away and we have a clean slate to start over. Our family and friends will grow in number. God's promise to always be with us is intact. And not just we will experience this but our children and our children's children and our children's children's children. Yes please, sign us up.

Jeremiah 31:13 paints the picture of what we all are looking for in life; a resolution worth living for. As God brings us back and returns us home, that is we are reunited in harmony

with God, “Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry.” God declares, “I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.”

God, if that is what home is like, take my hand and lead me home!

We had a chance for a few days after Christmas to go to the Lake and get a little “r and r”, as much as possible with three kids seven, six, and five all wanting you to play with them and their new toys. One of the things we like to do while there is walk around the block and see what kind of wildlife is out and get some fresh air. I was on a walk/run and race with both boys when Luke asked, “Dad, what is a home?” I will admit it was not what I was expecting from a 6-year-old but then again, I am learning more and more I need to stay on my toes. He has asked other good questions like “When was God born? and How was God born?” as well. I know, fun, right?

I took a moment and gave him an answer to his question “What is a home?” “Well buddy,” I said, “a house is a physical building whether there is anyone in it or not. A home, on the other hand, is a place where people live and spend time together playing and eating and talking and resting.”

In our spiritual journeys with God, God brings us to a homecoming, not a “house”-coming. God brings us together for a true life lived with others playing and eating and talking and resting and learning and growing and singing and praying and loving.

9 a.m.- Communion

Here is the best part, I think. This home God delivers us to is not simply a destination we can long for and hope for, reaching only at the conclusion of our earthly life. What Jeremiah is declaring, and Paul declares it as well, is that this home God returns us to can be experienced right here and right now as we believe and hope in God and follow God’s righteousness. By God, through Christ, and with the Holy Spirit, the same joy we imagine being filled with in eternity is available and possible for us to experience and be filled with now. I believe God is not only going to bring us home at some point, but that God is bringing us home through the strength God gives us to live and breathe today.

On New Year’s Eve, someone posted... “Tomorrow is the first blank page of a 365-page book. Write a good one.” Let’s. Let’s write a good one. Let’s, beginning today because today is all we have right now, write a good one together as God takes our hands and leads us home.

Let all God’s people say... Amen.