

“Homecoming- Part 4”

OT: Jeremiah 31:7-14

NT: Ephesians 1:3-14

We have discussed and wrestled together with this text from Jeremiah and others for the last 3 weeks. The overall theme of homecoming, the large umbrella, was introduced at the start of the new year with a charge to us for our New Years resolution to: (Do you remember?) open our hands to God’s hands, open our ears and listen to God’s sometimes still quiet voice, open our hearts and trust in where God is calling us to go, and take a breath resting in God’s hope. How are we doing in this so far? This resolution was a charge to return home to be reunited with God, not just in heaven someday, but right here and now today. That charge is as true today as it was 3 weeks ago.

Week 2 we celebrated the Ordination, Installation, and Commissioning of Elders with the reminder and charge that as members of God’s church, we are called to the ministry of rebuilding, restoring, refashioning, and reconciling when and where there is need. This charge came on the heels of the events unfolding on Capitol Hill which proved more for our country the work still left to be done. Together we can and together we will, with God’s help!

Then last week we dove into the water imagery found in this text: God’s decree to lead the people by brooks of water and their life with God would be like a watered garden. Water leads us to thoughts of baptism and baptism reminds us of our call to repentance, to turning back to God. We do so in the hope of God’s promise of belonging and redemption. Then, we were invited to reaffirm our faith in God as sovereign creator, Jesus as Lord and Savior, and Holy Spirit as empowering and guiding force within us.

Today, this text reveals another important topic: Community. Relationship. The “Kin-dom” as a part of the “king-dom.” There is a good chance we have all heard about community and relationships within community as God sees it, but as I have often found, just because we have heard it before does not mean we do not need to be reminded. We are a people that need to be reminded. We need to be reminded of appointments, opportunities, and where we last left our keys. We set alarms to remind us to set our alarm. We need to be reminded whose we are. We need to be reminded. And what we are being reminded of is of the utmost importance to our faith and our call to be a part of God’s household.

There are 3 related questions that help us begin:

Who is this prophecy for?

Who is God’s decree for?

Who are these words of love from God for?

The Holy call we encounter here in Jeremiah includes a large range of people to which God’s decree is meant to be heard: *those from the land of the north and from the farthest parts of*

*the earth*, people we might believe exist but never ever believe we would have anything to do with, *the blind and the lame*, often found wanting in a culture that holds the notion of purity as sacred, *those with child and those in labor*, those we know and those we doubt, those society has accepted and those society has pushed to its margins. God calls those, these, them, and us.

In this prophecy, Jeremiah makes a point of proclaiming that even those who could not otherwise be expected to make the journey will be included. In this prophecy, Jeremiah speaks of communal redemption. Not only will young women dance, and men of every age rejoice, but the most vulnerable members, God will bring home too. "God's redemption song is intended for a mighty chorus." (Andrew Nagy-Benson)

I do not know about you all, but the phrase more the merrier, comes to mind. It does my heart good to hear this good news from God through Jeremiah. I do not want to be alone with my people and theology and tradition, with limited hopes and dreams. I want, and need, to hear that God's love is bigger. I want, and need, to hear that the whole people are coming home, and that God is weaving the world through everyone.

Maybe you are like me and say, really everyone, with a slight blink of the eye and tilt of the head and snarl of the mouth. Everyone? Did you see what so and so did? Have you heard what so and so thinks? Do you think God really seeks everyone? I know, I get it, these are hard, and some might say, impossible questions for us. But they are not for God. Our role is to trust God, be a part, and follow in God's example. No exceptions.

We get this from the Ephesians text as well. The contextual background of that letter addresses the struggle by Christian Jews of the equal status of Gentile Christians as members of the people of God. Many Christian Jews thought that the only way to belong to the people of God was through the practice of the law and circumcision. As a result, the Gentile Christians felt the pressure either to assimilate by becoming converts or suffer the stigma of being considered unequal members or even outsiders. This letter to the Ephesians proclaims full membership, equal status, and honorable place for Gentile Christians in the people of God, in the household of God, in the temple of the Lord, and in the heavenly places with Christ alongside the Jews. One of the purposes of this text is to defend Gentile Christians and give them reassurance amid discriminatory attitudes and practices by some Christian Jews, and to call and inspire both Jews and Gentile believers to live their unity and equality in love. The Jews were not being cast aside by God; they were being added to.

What is so powerful here for us today is that we, to Christian Jews, were the Gentile Christians. We were not considered equal or worthy or welcome. Putting ourselves in a similar place today, what would it mean then if we carry and enact that mentality toward others: those who worship God in slightly different styles or host different traditions? Surely, we cannot play the payback card and be justified? Payback is not fair

play! Payback is not God's play. This is what Paul meant when he said, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Christian Jews and Gentile Christians were longing for the same thing in a slightly different way: God. And Jesus came to fling wide the gates and pull them together.

How would it work then for Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles to come together? It was not enough for the incorporation of Gentile believers as members of the people of God to become a part of the gospel. Unity and acceptance of the other needed to be more than a rule people were obligated to tolerate. Two things needed to happen.

First, a reaffirmation of God's sovereign and inclusive grace for Jews and Gentiles. A common ground to stand on needed to be determined, established, and acknowledged. That common ground was the belief in God's sovereign and inclusive grace.

Second, a redefinition of Israel considering God's revelation in Jesus Christ was needed. Things could not continue to operate the way they always had because Jesus changed the game. Perhaps some things would still fit, like the power of prayer and preaching, but there were adjustments to those practices and styles and some new initiatives that needed to be adopted. Consideration and compromise by all was needed.

The proclamation and praxis of the kingdom by Jesus and the proclamation and praxis of the gospel by early Christians led them to challenge different structures and relationships of separation and subordination. (Luis Rivera)

"The church will always be challenged by God's revelation in Jesus Christ to love and serve God and humanity and to reinvent herself in worship, life and mission in their sociocultural and religious contexts. Churches around the world and in human history have a missed record of complicity with and resistance to exclusive boundaries, excluding walls, and discriminatory hierarchies that religious and social communities build and legitimate. Churches have been both victims and victimizers of the power systems and spiritual captivities that racism, sexism, classism, religious prejudice, and other forms of systematic domination and exclusion have generated in societies and their institutions. The presence and praxis of God's spirit empowers and leads sectors in the churches to keep the memory and work faithfully for "kin-dom" communities that God envisions, and the gospel promises." (Luis Rivera)

"The Holy One is keeping covenant in ways broader than we might imagine. God speaks through diversity. We might approve or disapprove, but the speaking continues. Tension rises. Suddenly we have strangers in our backyard. This is the small town facing the steady influx of urban sprawl, the seaside hamlet bracing for summer tourists, the church and its neighbors squaring off over social issues. It is the secular world climbing all over us." (Malcolm Sinclair)

The question remains for us: How do we respond? Every church must ask themselves this. Every community must ask themselves this. Who is allowed in? Who can participate? Who is invited and accepted and invested in? (Just to be clear, this is more fundamental than the complex nature of immigration, or the decision to close borders to protect people from the spread of an international virus, or people's rights to own property and post a no trespassing sign.) God's decree in Jeremiah is evidence of God's approach. Christ's example and teachings passed along to the early church is evidence of God's approach. How will we respond?

*A story is told about a soldier who was finally coming home after having fought in Vietnam. He called his parents from San Francisco. "Mom and Dad, I'm coming home, but I've a favor to ask. I have a friend I'd like to bring home with me."*

*"Sure," they replied, "we'd love to meet him."*

*"There's something you should know," the son continued, "he was hurt pretty badly in the fighting. He stepped on a land mine and lost an arm and a leg. He has nowhere else to go, and I want him to come live with us."*

*"I'm sorry to hear that, son. Maybe we can help him find somewhere to live." "No, mom and dad, I want him to live with us."*

*"Son," said the father, "you don't know what you're asking. Someone with such a handicap would be a terrible burden on us. We have our own lives to live, and we cannot let something like this interfere with our lives. I think you should just come home and forget about this guy. He'll find a way to live on his own."*

*At that point, the son hung up the phone. The parents heard nothing more from him. A few days later, however, they received a call from the San Francisco police. Their son had died after falling from a building, they were told.*

*The grief-stricken parents flew to San Francisco and were taken to the city morgue to identify the body of their son. They recognized him, but to their horror they also discovered something they did not know, their son had only one arm and one leg.*

Is it possible the parents in this story are like many of us? Maybe we find it easy to love those who are good-looking or are fun to have around, but we do not like people who inconvenience us or make us feel uncomfortable? Maybe we would rather help "those people" find another place to play, eat, live, or worship?

Thankfully, God is someone who will not reject us, regardless of how messed up we are or appear to be. God is someone who loves us with an unconditional love that welcomes us home into the forever family of faithful believers.

In accord with God's decree and Jesus' example and teachings, how will we join their allegiance and do our part in embodying the "kin-dom" of the "king-dom"? How can we fling wide the gates?

One suggestion we can embody is to invite. As God's people, we are to be invitational to others. We are not responsible for the saving, but we are charged with the task of sharing our experiences and wanting others to be a part of it. When was the last time you invited someone to worship with you? When was the last time someone came with you that you invited?

Another suggestion we can embody is to get out of the way. We do not need to say no for people before we invite them or ask them. If they are already active in another church, great, but I have learned that even if someone says I am Methodist or Baptist or unaffiliated or Episcopalian or Catholic, that does not necessarily mean they were there last week or last month or in the last 10 years. Maybe they have heard you talking about God working in your life here at FPCLY, which I truly pray is what is happening for all of us, and all they are doing is waiting for you to invite them. Maybe they do not know they are welcome. Guess what? They are. Bring them on. More the merrier. We do not have to know what it means to be Presbyterian to encounter God here and encountering God is what it is all about for all of us. Let us invited and welcome people to encounter God, meet really great people, and we can define Presbyterian when the time is right.

Related to getting out of the way is trying not to predetermine whether someone would be good for the church or help the church in anyway- gifts and skills, big money, or positive attitude. Rather than have filters for who belongs, maybe we could embody the belief that some people might need the church first and that is perfectly alright. I would say we all need the church first, and it is through that need we find our place in ministry toward God and others.

I was coaching a middle school baseball team in Kings Mountain several years ago and we had a student try out. I did not know him, but he was a big kid with a good arm and bad attitude. He had a problem with listening and following rules. The worst part was he dragged other players into it with him. As we were making decisions on who would make the team, the head coach shared, I think this young man needs this team more than we need him right now. We kept him. He drove us bonkers and pushed our buttons, but his grades got better, and he stayed out of big trouble. He hit 4 homeruns and pitched 4 complete games in our short 10 game season.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, how is it that we are 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? How is that we are receiving and embodying the words of God's decree and Christ's example and teachings of belonging?

For all of us who are called by God and through our belief in God are placed by God among God's people, what is our relationship and responsibility toward those who may not yet believe or belong or behave in accordance with God's commandments to love God with all we are and love others? We can share. We can invite. We can open the door and welcome. We can toss our cultural filters and get out of the way. God, who is waiting with open arms to welcome, gather, and deliver, will work through the rest.

Blest be the tie that binds. We are all one in mission. Now let us do it!!!

Let all God's people say... Amen.