

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas

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

**Jeremiah 31:7-14** is essentially a message of hope. It comes near the end of the book of Jeremiah, which has consisted primarily of dire predictions of the evil that would befall the nation of Judah because of their refusal to follow the Mosaic covenant. But then, in chapters 30 and 31, a ray of hope bursts forth – the promise that, although Judah will have to face exile and punishment for their refusal to build a nation of political, economic and spiritual shalom, once their punishment has brought about the desired humbling effect, they will once again be restored to their beloved Promised Land.

“For thus says the Lord: sing aloud with gladness for Jacob and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise and say, “Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel”. See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather 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; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn” (vss. 7-9).

After the dark of the night, the day dawns! After the suffering and ignominy of exile and slavery, freedom and restoration comes! The nation of Judah will be freed and its political, economic and religious leaders will be released from captivity and returned to their liberated land. Israel’s former powerful and influential will return from exile, but also those who are the most vulnerable (the blind, the lame, the pregnant). The very fact that women will return pregnant from exile is an indication that the nation has a future and a hope. God will lead them back and will become a father to the people. That miraculous return will be witness to both Israel and to the world that God recognizes that they are family (although they were very much at one time prodigal children; cf. Luke 15:11-32)), and so will restore them because “this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found” (Lk. 15:24).

But the prophecy continues. “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”. For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. 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. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord” (vss. 10-14).

The focus now shifts from God’s communication to Israel to God’s communication with all the nations of the world. It is as if God is saying to the nations, “Look and see what it is like for a nation that makes Yahweh their God and who is willing to live in justice, equity and in relationship with him. Look and see how God loves his people and cares for them. For though they have been punished for their commitment to power, greed and domination (in imitation of

the other nations of the world), once Israel has seen the error of their ways and has repented, then God will restore them to health and wholeness, abundance and wealth. They will prosper (an abundance of grain, wine, oil, livestock). They will live in joy and delight (the women dance, the young and old men both make merry). They will be comforted by God. And they – young and old, women and men, laity and clergy – they will all experience the love and generosity of God! That is the end of all those who truly receive God’s grace and live in obedience to God’s call.

**Psalm 147:12-20** is a hymn of praise that follows on from Psalm 146. It praises God for his great love and power, exercised for humanity. I am struck once again, in verses 1-6, how the psalmist interposes the themes of the creative power of God and God’s commitment to the outcast and the powerless. It is intriguing that, invariably, these are the two primary characteristics of God lifted up by the psalmists. These are the two godly elements that cause us to perceive and worship God as God! Note the juxtapositions:

“The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. . . . The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground” (147:2-4, 6).

One of the most beautiful metaphors in the Psalm is the author’s use of a horse and a runner to describe those who compete well and are normally successful in life. The psalmist states that God does not take delight in the success of the most competitive (the “winners” or “haves” of society), but rather takes delight in those who “take pleasure” in God.

“His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of the runner; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love” (vss. 10-11).

The psalmist then ends this psalm with these words: “Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you. He grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat. He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down hail like crumbs – who can stand before his cold? He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow. He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances. Praise the Lord” (vss. 12-20).

The psalmist completes this hymn of worship by using God’s creative work as the connecting tissue throughout the Psalm. In the early part of the psalm, he had linked God’s creative power and God’s commitment to the outcast and the powerless. Now, he links God’s creative power (“he gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes; he hurls down hail like crumbs; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow”) and God’s commitment to create a nation of shalom (“he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you; he grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat; he declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel”).

The psalmist describes that shalom community that God is building within Israel. God's shalom people are a people with a strong defense against enemy attack (vs. 13a), a people whose children live in contentment and freedom (13b), a people who experience peace between each other (14a), who are economically prosperous (14b), and who are living in a right relationship with God (vs. 19). They are even a people who, living in shalom, experience oneness with creation subdued and quieted before them (vss. 15-18). In other words, the psalmist is describing Israel as a shalom community politically (vss. 13-14a), economically (14b) and religiously (vs. 19). Their systems, as well as they themselves as a people and as individuals, are "at-one" with God, each other and all creation. "(God) has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances" (vs. 20a). Therefore, how else can God's people respond but with the cry, "Praise the Lord" (vs. 20b)!

### **John 1:1-18.**

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:1-5).

With these dramatic words, the Gospel of John begins its Christmas story. But unlike Matthew and Luke that tells us of the birth of Christ, John tells us about creation itself – and Jesus' relationship to that creation. Therefore, since it is the "third Christmas story", it is appropriate to study this passage as the Gospel lesson for the Second Sunday in Christmastide.

"In the beginning was the Word". The Gospel of John opens with identical words to Genesis 1:1 – "In the beginning". Through the Hebrew creation story runs a profound theme, repeated eight times (Gen. 1:3-6 and 7, 9, 11, 14-15, 20-21, 24 and 26-30). That theme is "And God said . . . And it was so."

Genesis tells us that God *spoke* the world into existence. So, John is declaring the same truth. The Word – in Greek "*logos*", in Hebrew "*dabar*" – is not just *a* word spoken by human beings. It is *the* word, for the "*dabar*" or "*logos*" is the conduit by which Yahweh invades humanity and writes sacred history into our history. The "*logos*" of God *is* God, the voice of God speaking the creation into life. Without the Word, there is no world!

For whom is this Word intended? The Word, John is telling us, is intended for the world. The Greek word used here for "world" is "cosmos". The cosmos is not simply the geographical world – our sphere. The cosmos, to the Greeks, was the entire created order, the universe. The Word, John tells us, has entered the "cosmos" which God created, bringing to that cosmos "life", "light" and "power".

But how did the cosmos and its people respond? "The *cosmos* did not *know* him." "His own *people* did not *accept* him." Rejection of the Word (and therefore of God) occurred at two levels – societally (i.e., the cosmos) and individually (i.e., people). The "cosmos" and its "people" had

refused to come into an intimate relationship with its creator because “darkness” had kept it and its people from the “light”.

However, such rejection of the Word is not universal. “But to all who received (the Word) . . . he gave power to become children of God” (1:12). There are those who have responded to the Word and have become right with God. But how do they do that, John asks?

God’s people are to be shaped around their embracing of the free gift of God’s redemptive love (1:13), and making that “amazing grace” the foundation for their life together. God’s “shalom”, the “cosmos” as God intended it to be will come into existence through “all who received him, who believed in his name” and who therefore create together a new community, an alternative society built upon God’s love and grace.

The magnificent prologue of the Gospel of John now rushes toward its climax, as it gives to the reader the essential theme of the remainder of the Gospel of John.

*“The Word became flesh”*. The Word – the “*dabar*” of God, the “*logos*” of God, has become an actual, living human being. The Word “lives” among us within a human being! The Son of God, the enfleshment of the “Word”, is journeying through the human experience, John is telling us, as the personification of “grace and truth”.

But what does John mean by “grace and truth”? What John is doing here is using two Greek words to capture the essence of one Hebrew word – “*chesedh*”. “*Chesedh*” is the depth of God’s love expressed towards us, a love that accepts us as we are and yet calls us to become all that we have the potential that God has created us to be. And now John is telling us that God has “tabernacled” (the actual meaning of the Greek) among us so that we might become God’s people as we live out “*chesedh*” in both our private and public lives and in the very ways we carry out the political, economic and religious functions of our society.

Now the Prologue reaches its climax. It names the “Word”. The “father’s only son, full of grace and truth” is Jesus Christ. “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

God’s “*chesedh*” is not going to come to humanity and the “cosmos” any longer through “Moses” (that is, the Jewish political, economic and religious system). The Law created by God to incarnate God in humanity’s structures has become the exact opposite, for it has become the oppressive system of the first century that is designed to maintain power for the few while holding the populace in economic, political and religious slavery. The “Law” has become so exploitive and dominating that it is beyond redemption.

But “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”. God has had to find another way. And that way is Jesus!

What John is proposing here is radically revolutionary. Is he right? The remainder of the Gospel According to St. John is his effort to demonstrate through the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth the authenticity of what he has here proposed. And it is to

demonstrate that authenticity against the landscape of the horrendous oppression of the Jewish and Roman systems! This is the magnificent Christmas story of the Gospel of St. John.

**Ephesians 1:3-14** is the Epistle lesson for the Second Sunday of Christmastide. In its Greek original, Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence! Consequently, it is a single thought meant to introduce this entire letter. In other words, Ephesians 1:3-14 is the “executive summary” of this essay, in which Paul tells us what it is he is going to tell us more thoroughly throughout this letter.

In this section, Paul reviews what it is that God has done for us. He does so in a most succinct manner (even though it is all one lengthy sentence). Further, he then states why it is that God has done what he has done for us. Let’s look at that list.

First, God “*blessed* us in Christ, with every spiritual blessing” (1:3).

Second, God “*chose* us before the foundation of the world” (1:4).

Third, God “*adopted* (us) as his children through Jesus Christ” (1:5).

Fourth, God “*redeemed*” and “*forgave*” us through Christ’s redemptive work (vss. 7-8).

Fifth, God has “*made know to us* the mystery of *his will*” (i.e., what we are called to do as God’s people) (1:9).

Sixth, God has “*marked (us) with* the seal of *his Holy Spirit*” (1:13).

Thus, Paul is telling us that everyone of us as Christians and all of us as the Body of Christ have been blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, have come to know God’s will and are marked with the Holy Spirit! God has given all of this to us through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But why has God done this work in each of us and in all of us as Christians? Why has God blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, called, baptized us and filled us with God’s Spirit? This introduction to the book of Ephesians now reaches its apex of intention. God has done this great work within each of us and all of us, Paul writes, so that we, as God’s adopted family, might participate in God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10), so that we “might live for the praise of his glory” (1:12).

God has worked in us as individuals and as a community of faith in the ways Paul describes in this passage in order that we might live out in the world the work that Jesus intends to do through God (“things in heaven”) and through us (“things on earth”). But what does Paul mean by “things in heaven and things on earth?”

Because this passage is the “executive summary” of the entire book of Ephesians, Paul will spend much of the remainder of that book in defining “things in heaven and things on earth” and

our obligations towards them. Paul, as a first century person, believed that the spirit world (“things in heaven”) and the physical world (“things in earth”) were closely link. This is caught up in Paul’s theology of the “principalities and powers” that is developed throughout the books of Ephesians and Colossians.

Paul’s theology of “the principalities and powers” is built on the premise that what happens in the spirit world has its counterpart on earth, and what happens on earth impacts heaven. Therefore, the principalities and powers are, at one and the same time, both spiritual and earthly, with the spiritual dimension of that power providing the spiritual dimension and unique power of any earthly system! Therefore, we need to understand that *every* reference in Ephesians to “principalities and powers” or “heaven and earth” is a reference both to the Roman Empire and to the dark spiritual forces controlling and shaping and driving the Roman Empire!

Thus, in Ephesians 1:10, Paul’s reference to “(God’s) plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” is not rhetoric to Paul. It is his code for the political, economic and religious institutions of earth – and especially of Rome – and their matching “principalities and powers” in the heavens (cf. Col. 1:15-16).

Since Paul means here the systems of the government, of the marketplace and of religion, what is he saying that the church is called to do? What he is stating is that the church is to be active in participating on the side of God in challenging the systems here on earth, even as the angels wage comparable war in the heavens. What Paul is declaring is that ***the church is to be involved in public life as its essential mission!*** And that is why God has “blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, made known his will, and given us the Holy Spirit” – so that we could be God’s agents in the world, working through the politics, economics and social systems of that society to transform it into the kingdom of God!

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