

Jeremiah 31:7-14 Pastor Bill Uetracht 1/3/21 2 Christmas

During these days of great isolation, Bev and I have been taking some short trips around town or through portions of West and Central Michigan to experience places, frankly, we haven't paid much attention to in previous years. During one of these trips, I started talking with her about the Jeremiah passage that is our first reading for today. I pointed out that it is all about God gathering together his people. "See," God says, "I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth." And then later in the text: "Hear the word of the Lord, O nations. He who scattered Israel will gather Israel again and will keep him as a shepherd [takes care of his flock.]"

I told Bev that this image of God gathering so spoke to one of the deepest needs that my soul has, a need that becomes more poignant the older I become. As I look at my own story and my own history, I find myself longing for the various portions of my life to come together, to be gathered together. I think back on all the people who have been a part of my life, and note how they have slipped through my fingers, and have become simply a part of memory. I long to gather all of those people together. I want to bring them all back to Jerusalem.

I am convinced that one of the appeals of Facebook is the promise that it can do just that. The kid with whom you played ping pong in the fourth grade and whom you consigned to the annals of your history can become your friend again. Your past can become present again. I am a part of a Facebook group that is called "You know you grew up in Greenhills, if...." I grew up in Greenhills, a northern Cincinnati suburb. It's fun to experience what the people of my past remember. It's fun to be gathered together with them.

But as fun as that is, I sense, still, that this kind of gathering together is not ultimately satisfying, nor fully what it means for God to

gather together. Sometimes this kind of gathering is simply a matter of looking to the past and, yes, staying there. Remember when? I experience this with those who gather on Facebook to go down Muskegon's memory lane. Oh, wasn't the downtown great then? Ya, it probably was. But to get stuck there isn't going to help us as we move into new days and ways.

I suspect that some of our attempts (like Facebook) to gather together have an illusory character to them. We're convinced that, somehow, we can engineer this coming together, and then we discover how deeply disappointing our efforts are. That fourth grader you played ping pong with--yikes, how did he become what he's become? That high school best friend—whoa, was he really like that back then?

Our efforts to gather together, while commendable sometimes, often are all about us, our needs, our wants. I know for me one of my needs is for time to slow down, for the passage of time to stop. Maybe if I can gather with the folks who were a part of my past, the past won't have to be past anymore. It can be present. What an illusion! As the arrival of the New Year suggests, time marches on. I cannot recreate a past. I cannot stop the march toward death.

The Jeremiah text today is all about a new thing God is doing, the return of the exiles to home. The exiles being referred to are likely those who were sent away from their homes when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem. But actually, and I found this insight quite intriguing, the exiles might have been those who were sent off into other lands a couple of centuries previous. Jeremiah is looking for a giant reunion. And he says that God is going to make this great reunion possible.

So, "sing aloud with gladness for Jacob (Israel), and raise shouts. Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel. I am going to bring

them from every direction, including the blind and the lame, those with children and those who are pregnant.”

What an inclusive vision! Coming home will be folks from every direction, the weak and the vulnerable, those who are slowed down by their life situation (call that situation, children), and those who are living on the edge of hope but hindered by the practicalities of hope (call that, pregnancy). A great company is heading home, will be gathering together.

Now I am taken by what Jeremiah says about those who by God’s work of creating a straight and lush path for them are making their way home. He says, “With weeping, they will come, and with consolations I will lead them back.” You’d think that their return would simply be about joy and laughter. What’s this about weeping?

I’ve been saying this for a while, but I will say it again. Coming back home also involves an honest appraisal of what has been lost. It does entail looking to the past. I am convinced that when we come back together more fully as a community, we will come with tears *and* laughter, great joy *and* great grief. When you gather with folks whom you haven’t seen for a while, or maybe have never seen, when you come back to home that is really home, you are aware of what you have missed, what has slipped through your fingers. While you are ready to dance and make merry, you cry. Yes, they are tears of joy, but they are also tears of grief. The exiles have missed out on so much. As they head toward home, that *so much* is so real.

Some of you who are listening to this have had an enormous amount of grief during this past year. And some of that grief couldn’t be expressed fully. We couldn’t remember loved ones with the fullness that we would have wanted to. I am committed to not to forget the grief that we had to downplay, not because I want to keep us focused on the past, but because an honest appraisal of the joy of our coming

together will include the grief that has been a part of this journey. “With weeping, they will come, and with consolations I will lead them back.” Grief is real. God will meet our grief with his comfort. God’s comfort will make the homecoming even sweeter.

As my wife and I were talking about all of this the other day in the car, she said, “You know, these days we are exiles.” Ya, Bev. You are right. We are the scattered, longing to be gathered together. The power of the exile story, it seems to me, is that it is our story, the human story. In one way or the other, we are always scattered. In one way or the other, we are not home. Even when we are home, we are not always home. Home isn’t always that homey for us. Sometimes more than anything, some of us want to get away from home. But even as we do that, we still long for home. And we will search for it in one way or another. Perhaps you remember the great Biblical beginning story about our being kicked out of the garden, kicked out of home. And ever since, we have been searching for it. Bev, you are right. Exile is our story.

But that story, that experience is met by the God who is always bringing exiles home, gathering them together. He who scattered Israel will gather Israel together again. God is a gathering God, bringing all people and all things together. In our gospel lesson for today, John speaks of the Word, the word that was with God and the word that was God. The Greek word for “word” is *logos*. In its origins that word meant “gather.” Words gather together thoughts so that they can be communicated. From the very beginning, God has been gathering together. From the very beginning, from before creation, John would have us know, God has been ordering life so that it might have meaning, direction, and purpose. From the very beginning, God has been about bringing everybody and everything home.

Interestingly enough, though, John says, that home isn't something we ascend to, as if it is something up there we have to reach. No! John tells us that the Word, that which gathers everything together, has visited where we live. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. The word set up its tent in our campground, moved into our neighborhood. That which brings everything together is among us.

Home is not something we have to accomplish. Home is our gift. In God, we who are exiles are home. And this gift doesn't keep us stuck in the past, trying to recreate some far-removed day, but rather takes us into a new future where we shall be "radiant over the goodness of the Lord, where our lives will become like a watered garden, where the young women shall rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry."

I know that day seems far off right now, but it's coming. The One who scattered Israel will gather Israel again. Gathering together is what God does, and God gets the final word.