Christmas 2

January 3, 2021

Jeremiah 31:7-14

The weather yesterday reminded me of being in Texas, sheltering at home when tropical storms or hurricanes would come through.

One storm we were far enough inland to not really be affected by came in September 2008, when Hurricane Ike steamrolled over the barrier islands on the coast of Texas.

There’s an aerial photograph of one area that shows the damage. Only one house remained standing. There were no other structures for blocks all around, just pieces of what used to be houses and trees and holes where they used to stand.

After previous storms, the owners of the house had made modifications and repairs above and beyond those required by building codes, because they’d suffered damage before. But even though they’d made those changes, their house still sustained significant damage.

Thousands of buildings on the barrier islands were destroyed or severely damaged; still, many of the people returned and rebuilt.

Rebuilding is what we do.

It’s what God does, too.

In our text from Jeremiah, we hear a message of hope offered to the people. They hadn’t suffered from a storm, but from defeat and exile. Jeremiah, like other prophets, tells us that the people were defeated and exiled because they were unfaithful. They worshiped gods other than God. They failed to keep the commandments. They strayed from the ways God had instructed them to live so they could be a people that cared for each other and allowed for all to flourish; so they could be a light for the nations, pointing to God.

Into the pain and suffering of exile, Jeremiah brought a message of hope. God would rebuild them by redeeming them, gathering them together, and leading them home.

And this is what God does for us, as well. We are redeemed through Christ, formed into one as the church on earth, and God leads us on paths of righteousness, eventually leading us to our eternal home.

But just as rebuilding a house using stronger materials does not prevent it from suffering damage, “a proclamation of salvation does not necessarily herald the end of all suffering.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Our redemption and the promise of eternal life with God do not mean we no longer know pain or sorrow. Instead, they serve to guide us as we rebuild.

The exiled Israelites would return home and need to rebuild in ways that reflected what they’d been through. They would need to learn again what it meant to be God’s people, what it meant for their faith to guide them. They would need to learn again to trust that God would not abandon them if they strayed from the path of faithfulness, but also remember that straying carried a price.

We too are called upon to learn from the storms and exiles of our lives, and to rebuild in ways that reflect what we’ve been through, in ways that not just reflect but ***embody*** the love of the God who accompanies us through the valley of the shadow and beyond.

I am deeply grateful that 2020 is over. But the challenges it brought to us didn’t magically disappear as the clock struck midnight and we began a new year. The path before us is still a long one.

This past year has shined a light on the ways we have strayed, on the ways humans suffer at the hands of each other, at the hands of those who are ruled by greed, by fear, by a desire for power, by their certainty that they are good and right and those who disagree with them are, by extension, bad and wrong.

In a very real sense, all that has led to another exile.

And while Jeremiah’s words were originally for a people who had been defeated and uprooted and forced to live in a foreign land, they continue to speak to us today. They continue to offer hope for us today.

Hearing those words of comfort reminds that God is the one who is making our salvation and redemption possible, not us. We can’t mess it up. We can stray from the path — and we will — and we can find ourselves in exile, but we will not find ourselves abandoned by God.

And Jeremiah’s words remind us to be diligent in looking for how God is accompanying us on our journey through the valley of the shadow and will continue to be with us beyond it.

Because only when we seek God can we experience the love of God. A love which is so great that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. And by so doing offered us the chance to encounter the nature of God — abundant grace, unconditional love, unending mercy.

Being a disciple is being an extension of that grace and love and mercy.[[2]](#footnote-2) Just as God became incarnate in the form of the baby Jesus, we are to incarnate God’s love for others.

When they returned to Jerusalem, the work for the Israelites began in earnest. Confident in the promises of God, they began to relearn how to be God’s faithful people. Rebuilding took a lot of work.

And we have a lot of work to be done as we return from our exile. Because while “the world is not saved by any of us trying harder, neither are we bystanders in this world.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Our salvation is not conditional upon our good works. Our good works are the ways we demonstrate our gratitude for our salvation. They are the ways we demonstrate that we have learned from the storms and exiles we have weathered, and are determined to rebuild better and stronger and more faithfully.

Jeremiah instructed the people to rejoice, to “sing aloud for gladness.” Better days were coming. God would lead them home.

Better days are coming for us, as well. One day, we will gather in this place and sing aloud for gladness.

Until then, may you know the peace that can only come from God, and may you be a sign of that peace for others.

1. *Connections*, Jeremiah 31:7-14, Connecting to the World, Heath Derwell, p. 268 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries series, Karoline Lewis, 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mariann Edgar Budde, Christmas Eve sermon, December 24, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)