



Roanoke, Virginia

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“What’s Next”

Jeremiah 31:7-14

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Today we hear from the prophet Jeremiah. We are in the 31st chapter, which is part of a three-chapter section that plucks us from the warnings and judgments of Jeremiah’s prophetic word and lifts us into a vision of encouragement and hope. This section is so unique and set apart Chapters 30, 31, and 33 have come to be known as the Book of Consolations.

Let us listen for the Word of God as it comes to us from Jeremiah 31:7-14.

*⁷ 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.”*

*⁸ 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.*

*⁹ 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.*

*¹⁰ 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.”*

*¹¹ For the Lord has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.*

*¹² 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.*

*¹³ 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.*

*¹⁴ I will give the priests their fill of fatness,
and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty,
says the Lord.*

“A young child is crouching over the sand, shovel in hand. Below her sustained yogalike posture—knees bent, head hung low—is a sandcastle. Hours later, after high tide reaches its height and recedes, the child returns to the beach. Her castle has been reduced to an inexact mound. After a slight sigh, the child strikes the pose again and starts digging, dumping, and packing the wet sand.”¹

This beautiful illustration is how one commentator castles God’s people then, and us today, in Jeremiah’s prophetic word and imagery of hope. Yet, as the tide of 2024 recedes and the current of 2025 swiftly takes us into a new year, I am sure there are memories we wish to undo or redo, items on our to-do lists left incomplete, hopes and dreams, and possibly even relationships, that have been unrealized, if not reduced to an inexact mound. Looking back to the castles we worked to build, or even hoped to have built, our past can teach us something about what’s next.

¹ The Rev. Andrew Nagy-Benson in his “Pastoral Perspective Essay” published in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1*, p.170.



I mean we still hold those memories; they don't just go away. Our to-do lists change and grow, with some items being carried over. Our hopes and dreams remain vivid and tethered to who we are right now and who we are or hope to become. And standing over the mounds of last year, it is sometimes hard to muster up the courage, the vulnerability, the faith even, to crouch down once again, pick up the shovel, and get back to work.

The commentary continues: “We build something beautiful in our minds or with our hands, and we hope our work endures. Then the tide comes in and rolls over us. And yet, hurricane season after hurricane season, trial after trial, setback after setback, we rebuild. It is what we do. It is also what God does.”

Jeremiah is not a happy prophet or an encouraging prophet. He spends 40 years warning his people of a coming disaster, only to be punished and pushed aside. Jeremiah preached and prophesied in a tumultuous time of unrest and unsettling as power in the region shifted when the Assyrian empire fell to the Babylonians, who then eventually conquered Jerusalem several decades later. Yet when the Assyrian Empire fell, Judea marched toward a renewed faith and practice required by the Lord. Most prophets of the time saw this as a good thing—not Jeremiah. Jeremiah was alone, if not also a loud voice that called the new religious nationalism, not righteousness, but self-righteousness. In his view, the renewed enthusiasm was not faithful, it was arrogant. Those who trusted in themselves and their own righteousness were doomed to end up just like the Assyrians. Jeremiah made this clear back in chapter 17: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord... Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.”

However reluctant Jeremiah and most biblical prophets are to assume such role, he is a true prophet. And a true prophet's function is to proclaim the word of God. To the ears of his listeners, his message was judgmental, damning, and closed-minded, if not also hateful. But as one truly proclaims the word of God, they ultimately speak words of love.

Jeremiah's prophetic words point to devastation, disaster, and dispersion. Yet, we arrive at our passage today to hear of God's promise to refashion and rebuild the sands of the fractured covenant with the people of Israel. Israel's restoration from Exile was totally unexpected, because the Exile hasn't even happened yet in the flow of Jeremiah's prophecy. Yes, it has been predicted chapter after chapter, but here in 587 BCE the destruction of Jerusalem with all the catastrophes that accompanied such a thing was still a year away. Before the people of Israel are forced to leave their land, Jeremiah preaches a promise of a homecoming. It's as though God is saying: “I've been telling you that the worst thing you can imagine is going to happen. And you may think that will be



the end of you. But I want you to know before it even happens that I can and will redeem you even from that.”²

Return. Reconciliation. Restoration. That is the promise. A promise planted within the words of unrealized devastation, but a promise, nonetheless. And upon that promise, rests Israel’s hope. From words of exodus, we now hear the language of return. From wilderness wandering, we now find a “straight path.” The once disgruntled and murmuring people “shall not stumble” on the stones of complaint but will come home singing songs of praise. Mourning will turn to joy, and gladness will come from sorrow.

Jeremiah is offering God’s people a promise of love, redemption, and renewal. He sees what will happen, but he also sees that God will not abandon God’s people. Their punishment will not go on forever, and God will save them from both their enemies and from themselves.

Nobody wants to hear that pain comes before healing, or darkness comes before light, or dishonor before glory. But it is a pattern that is repeated in all aspects of faith. And Jeremiah could see Israel was about to begin that cycle again. Yet there is always grace. Grace is present in every aspect of the cycle. Grace is known in the abiding presence of a God who “will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth.” Grace is seen in the abiding presence of a God who includes “the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor”—a welcome word of hope to those who need it most for no one will be left behind. Grace is found in the new life of the gathered people which will be like that of “a watered garden”—full of possibility.

We are all somewhere in that cycle. You might be weeping. You might be overwhelmed by feelings of loss, grief, loneliness, or regret. And unfortunately, some of us might be experiencing a sort of exile, feeling far removed from the good life we once knew. If so, your ears might not be receptive to hear words of renewal, words of hope and promise in becoming a “watered garden” as you experience the cold clutch of winter’s gusts.

Beloved, no matter where you are in that cycle, hear this: God is there with you. God is in the pain. God is in the darkness. God is there, wherever you are, extending grace and love.

Love is what drives God to be God. Verse three of this chapter, God says, “I have loved you with an abiding love.” The God of Israel cannot cease to care. Even when God thinks to quit, nullify Israel, and banish the memory, God’s mind is overtaken by a deeper love, and so yearns beyond the betrayal. Jeremiah is telling his listeners then, and us today, that God’s pain is true, and

² Stan Mast in his commentary on Jeremiah 31:7-14, January 5, 2020, for the *Center for Excellence in Preaching*.



that grief bespeaks possibility. Ungrieved life blocks new hope. And as God grieves alongside us, there is a promise of new life.

As we remain in the mystery of love that is the Christmas season, the fulfillment of that promise was born as a baby. God in flesh, Jesus the Christ, came to teach, to heal, to show us a life that really is life. And he also came to suffer and die. He laid in the tomb for three days, until love and grace were made visible in resurrection. Pain comes before healing, darkness before light, dishonor before glory. That is the cycle of faith. And whether you are initially building the sandcastle, or just now seeing the mound that has been left behind, or currently crouched down again, with shovel in hand, working to rebuild, God's promise of hope and love is there for you!

God's promise reaches the unguarded parts of us and gathers up the longings of our hearts. Somehow, grief, regret, anger, neglect, and chances come and gone are all reclaimed and redeemed. For there is a homecoming for us all. It's an invitation that needs no reply because God is God, and we are not.

In a few moments, we will experience a homecoming as God gathers us at the Lord's Table, to communion with the Risen Christ, and bring with us our human grief which is then meet by divine love. A love so great that our souls will be satisfied through God's bounty.

Beloved, as the new year always seems to bring words of renewal, of rebirth, of resolution, may you hear God's words of forgiveness and hope and God's promise to rebuild the inexact mounds of our lives. Yet we are called to pick up the shovel ourselves, strike the pose again, and begin digging, dumping, and packing the wet sand. Not only to rebuild our lives but also help build up a world that calls all people worthy and loved—for then the world may become a “watered garden”—full of possibility for all of creation.

And we can look ahead to what's next: the homecoming set before us.

May it be so. Amen.

