

Heading Back to Base

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-14

January 8, 2012

There are multiple themes for this Sunday. Not unlike the nature of our lives, we have more than we can say grace over or, absent another cliché, we have more possibilities for emphasis this morning than we have time. So, we will edit, select and focus on one or two themes and get to the others another day.

I can almost hear a John Cleese character playing a headmaster in an English boys school explaining how things will go in the next few weeks now that we are all back from our holiday:

“In the church year, which began with Advent a little over a month ago, we are at the second Sunday after Christmas, which also recognizes the Baptism of the Lord, the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, which is celebrated in many traditions as the first Sunday after the Epiphany of the Lord. This allows

the church to bring in the three wise men as symbolic recognition of Jesus as the true Messiah while he is still a child. Then we fast-forward to the Baptism of the Lord, where he is an adult meeting John at the river, and by the middle of January you have Jesus squared away on his home turf, recognized as the true Messiah, now baptized and ready to get on with why he is here in the first place.”

It's all very neat for the calendar, I suppose, but for those of us who are still getting over Christmas and trying to figure out the best way to tackle a new year it is a bit much and a bit fast. Better to have a little time for reflection on what lies ahead for all of us, the people of God, who happen to be in this place and part of this beloved congregation at this time. Welcome, therefore, to alternative text number one for the second Sunday after Christmas, Jeremiah 31:7-14:

^{31:7}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.”⁸See, 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.⁹With 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.

¹⁰Hear 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.”¹¹For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.¹²They 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.¹³Then 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.¹⁴I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

What a refreshing device a revised covenant is, especially in the hands of God’s prophet Jeremiah. “No longer will we be constricted by that old former covenant,” says God, through the voice of the prophet Jeremiah. “Now we will all enjoy a new covenant in which there will not be the old conditional promises that required right behavior all of the time by you, my people. From here on we will enjoy a new covenant in which I promise to be your faithful God and you will be my people, even when you are unfaithful and disappoint me. That is to say, even though you will continue to sin, I will promise to forgive you and love you and remain loyal to you.” This is the new covenant that is declared in this thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah.

It is the great bond we have with God, with our Jewish ancestors and with all people of other traditions who call themselves the people of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

I happen to think this text is so foundational to our life together as the people of God that I have used it at weddings often, even once when a wise retired rabbi and I were officiating at the marriage of a Christian groom and Jewish bride. A friend of the groom was to read the text from the closing verses of this 31st chapter of Jeremiah. He was a journalist for none other than the Los Angeles Times but on this occasion his professional discipline failed him: he forgot to bring his text to this hotel/garden setting for the wedding. Thinking quickly I said to him, grab a Gideon Bible in the hotel bedroom and read from that. All seemed fine and we proceeded to begin the ceremony. When it came time for the reading, Richard performed like the pro I knew him to be, the vows and rings were exchanged, the rabbi prayed eloquently and the benediction was said. And yet, before we were even out of the garden setting, while posing for one more round of photographs, the ever-anxious mother of the bride said to her daughter, in an audible stage whisper, “Was that a Christian Bible he was using for the Scripture?” “Yes,” replied her Georgetown University-educated daughter, “they believe the covenant is for them too. Now hush or you’ll hurt their feelings.”

So there you are: *A timeless covenant for all of the people of God with which we begin a new year on the calendar and in*

the church. In this precious prophecy is the promise of new beginnings to a people recently returned to base, their home in Judah, where fields are fertile and water from streams is plentiful and life for all is good:

“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 consolation 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.” (Jer. 31:8-9)

The time of restoration to the homeland from Babylonian captivity is also seen as “a time of healing and inclusion.” Those previously excluded by the laws of Leviticus are now included and welcomed. Foreigners, those “not like us” as well as “seekers,” those new to the faith, are welcomed. Here they are, back from exile, a lighter, slimmer, less wealthy people who will be the faithful that rebuild the land and live in the promises of God faithfully, blessed with grand opportunity for a new chapter in the history of God’s people in that place. Why, if I didn’t know better, I would say it sounds like a description of BMPC as she anticipates a new day with a new senior pastor in the year of our Lord 2012. The faithful will declare that this time ahead is a period in which God is leading this congregation

to new forms of ministry, reaching out to potential new members, finding new appreciation for the traditions that have brought us here and the foundation of mission, learning, fellowship and worship on which our life together is built.

Or, since this is still on the calendar as the Sunday in which we celebrate the baptism of the Lord and all the new beginnings that suggests, we could focus symbolically on those *streams of water*, real and figurative, that nurture and sustain us. Think of it: You and I stand on the shoulders of giants in the faith, some of them still living, some already gone on that greater journey to a distant shore, all giving witness to the faith that God is in this place and that God has promised to be with this congregation, to sustain us, and to affirm the truth that greater days are still to come.

Theologian Christopher Hays¹ must have had this church in mind when he recalled recently the perspective of Old Testament scholar, and Presbyterian, Walter Brueggemann: While writing about the Psalms, Brueggemann suggested that the Psalms can be thought of as leading the reader through three psychological stages: *orientation* (to the worship of God), *disorientation* (a loss of direction, or a sense of the failure of the promises), and *reorientation*.² “One sees just such a progression

¹Christopher B. Hays *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1*, (Louisville, London, John Knox/Westminster Press: p. 172), 2010.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed., Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp. 3-32) 1996

in (the text for this day),” writes Dr. Hays. “God does not punish forever, nor has Israel abandoned its faith in its God because of its awful historical experiences. Indeed the proclamation of Israel here in Jeremiah 31 is very much like that of a psalmist who tells of his suffering at God’s hand, only to follow with an account of his healing, and close with praise: ‘*Declare it to the coastlands far away, say; He who scattered Israel will gather him (vs. 10)*. Also like a psalm, this passage invites the reader to sing with joy.’”³

So that is our song of Jeremiah for this Second, Sunday after Christmas. The Lord’s promises to Judah are still strong for us as well. God has not reneged on the promises to provide them with the water and bread of life.

God has not forgotten God’s faithful people in Bryn Mawr. God has declared over and over again God’s determination to reveal God’s vision for the people of God in this place, a place where the scattered are drawn together as though by a shepherd, the displaced are given a home, those with little hope in a confusing world find new reason to be hopeful, and those who were once disoriented in the life of faith find themselves reoriented and determined to live with purpose.

A refreshing Happy New Year to us all. Thanks be to God.

³ Op. cit.