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Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:1-18

January 5, 2025

***Jeremiah 31:7-14***

***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 where 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 does 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.***

***John 1:1-18***

***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.***

***6There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.***

***10He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.***

***14And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. 15(John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ ”) 16From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.***

Most great things take a little extra effort.

A better job?– work harder at tasks, interpersonal skills, knowledge, job related training;

A better relationship? – work harder at intimacy, honesty, vulnerability, communication, humility, clarity, self-awareness;

Better health? – work harder at diet and exercise and self-care;

Better at a skill? – do it more;

Communication is no different. Great communication takes a little extra effort. Great communication requires creativity. The gospel of John takes a little extra effort to understand, but it’s worth it for the great message.

A few weeks ago we talked about how much more magnificent Mary’s words were when she sang her Magnificat. She wanted to express more than just the thoughts. She wanted to express the feelings and the depth of those feelings. Mere words wouldn’t do. So she sang. In the same way, both of our scripture readings for today use words creatively, as poetry, to express more than just thoughts. Both Jeremiah and the gospel of John use an artist’s voice to invoke the imaginations of the readers/listeners to evoke feelings. In this way, the impact is much greater than the use of mere words.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke to a community reeling. “Despite the recent destruction of Jerusalem, the prophet declares that hope isn’t lost, and offers tender words of divine compassion.” Taken from the portion of the prophets words, chapters 30-33 known as the Book of Consolation, “Jeremiah 31 appeals to the audience’s imagination with soaring language and compelling images.” “Given the harshness of their present circumstances, Jeremiah’s audience would find it difficult to imagine themselves in a happier state. So the poet does it for them.”1

This is what the world needs right now!

The beginning of 2025 is not the first time society has been worried about the year ahead. We can probably think of many New Year’s celebrations that carried a bit of tension. Imagine ringing in the New Year, while WWI or WWII were happening. Imagine ringing in the New Year 1919 when the Great Influenza that began in 1918 was still going full force was happening. And in our lifetimes, even as we remember 25 years ago, we rang in the year 2000 with many believing that the world was going to end. And for those not quite *that* fearful, still the great worry and expectation was that the need for computer generated dates to require four digits instead of just two would render all of our automated and interconnected global systems impotent. Even our most recent pandemic experience has reminded us that the future will always be full of unimaginable events.

The beauty of the poetic and metaphor filled words of Jeremiah and of the prologue to the gospel of John is that at times of distress or confusion or unknowing, merely *saying* “Don’t worry,” or “God has our back,” is not satisfying. We don’t just want to hear that we will get through it, or that life will be better, we want to feel that we can trust those words. We often need to go beyond words to find the deeper assurances that we need. This is where creative expression like poetry, like song, like any of the arts, is crucial. When words are not enough, we must find ways to convey assurances. One commentator I read even said that “At a time when many people are experiencing hopelessness and anxiety, the work of artists is more important than ever.”1

While we might prefer that the author of the gospel of John would simply say “It will be okay” and get right to the point, “because the prologue is poetic and mystical, it moves us in a way that transcends thought.”2

“In the beginning….” This description of God existing long before any human description of context was needed – no kingdoms or emperors or time frames are mentioned here – God has always been. This description takes greater effort to understand, but it’s worth it because the message is that God who is from before the beginning is constant and forever and has come to us like never before. In Christ, that life is indescribable – it is like a light in the darkness, a light that can never be quenched. The light in the darkness reminds us of the light at creation. It’s the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overtake it. The word used for “overtake” implies a chasing, a grasping, seizing. Festivals of light are important is all world religions and cultures. It takes poetry to help us realize that the gospel is not describing something as simple as a light switch toggling on and off. Or a flashlight, a minimal piece of light in a vast darkness. No, no matter how dark the place we find ourselves, the light of Christ promised in this gospel prologue is the true light, unstoppable, more than darkness can even comprehend.3

The Christ candle we lit on Christmas Eve was the candle of this Light. On this second Sunday of Christmas we celebrate that this light goes on. The birth of Christ ushered in a time of grace and truth. The word grace is only used four times in the entire gospel of John, and all four of those times are in these last lines of the prologue.3 “*14And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.  16From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”*

As we continue the season of Christmas and enter the season of Epiphany, mere words are not enough to remind us, console us, assure us, that Christ came into the world as God’s only Son on that night in Jerusalem, born as a babe just as we were born. We need poetry, music, our imaginations in order to deeply believe, deeply know in our bones, that the promise of the Word made flesh is for all.

Amen.

1Working Preacher, Jeremiah 31:7-14, J. Blake Couey, January 5, 2025 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-christmas-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-317-14-10>

2Working Preacher, Meda Stamper, John 1:1-18, January 5, 2025

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-christmas-3/commentary-on-john-11-9-10-18-10>

3Working Preacher, Karoline Lewis, January 2015, John 1:1-18

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-christmas-2/commentary-on-john-11-9-10-18-5>