

To Rebuild the Nations
Jeremiah 31: 1-14
Series: "The Work of Christmas"
Feb 3, 2019
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Sometimes, things are too good to be true. Like a certain store I used to shop in that sent me coupons on a regular basis. (Now you may not know this about me, but when it comes to clothes, I *love* a bargain. The less I have to pay for it, the more I like it!) This coupon would declare, "Ten dollars off any regular priced item" but when I got to the store, not a *single thing* turned out to be "regular price." What I thought was going to be a bargain ended up being a hoax. It wasn't what it said it was; it really *was* too good to be true.

There are other things are too good to be true. A few years ago, Reebok came out with sneakers that had rocker bottoms on them; they claimed that if you wore these shoes you would tone your calves *and* your butt simply by walking! *Too good to be true!* Reebok ended up paying \$25 million dollars and refunding purchasers' money; the shoes did nothing they claimed to do.

Listerine had a season when it was "too good to be true"! Warner-Lambert, the company who made Listerine back in 1976 was fined \$10 million after its claim that its mouthwash "prevented colds and sore throats" was found to be untrue. The same product ran into trouble again in 2005 when then-owner Pfizer claimed using Listerine was as good as flossing. Not so!

And do you remember the slogan "Made from sugar so it tastes just like sugar?" That used to be Splenda's claim to fame, that is, until it lost a court case in 2007 because in reality, there *is* no actual sugar in Splenda. (<http://business.time.com/2011/10/11/14-products-with-notoriously-misleading-advertising-claims/>) The list goes on but you get the point: some things

that *sound* too good to be true turn out to *be* too good to be true! And our *scripture* this morning just happens to be *one of them*!

The 31st chapter of Jeremiah joins chapter 30 in being known as the “Book of Consolation.” Up until this point the Prophet’s words have been harsh and biting, pointing out the sin and shortfalls of Israel. Situated after the first Babylonian deportation of Judeans in 597 (see Jeremiah 24 and 29) the surrounding texts strike ominous notes regarding the Babylonian invasion, God's wrath, and devastating disputes that fractured God's people. All that seems to fall away, however, when we read chapters 30 and 31; here Jeremiah pours on the charm and envisions a time when healing and restoration will fill the land. People from both Israel and Judah will return from exile; the very land itself will rejoice! This is **great news**!

Look at the promises spelled out here: in verses 2-6, the subject of the blessings is feminine. “Again I will rebuild you, and you shall be built! Again you shall take your tambourines and go for the in the dance of the merrymakers.” Vineyards will be planted, fruit harvested! Everyone will go together to Zion—the rebuilt temple of Jerusalem—and worship God! It’s an amazing thing!

And that’s *not all*; there’s more! Verses 7-9 have a male subject. “I will bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth....I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path.....” This is going to be *remarkable*! After losing their land, after being scattered into exile, after the destruction of the Temple, after wondering and wandering, God is going to *restore* the nation, *reunite* them in their own land, bless them with plenty to eat and drink, and usher in the great celebration of restoration and peace! *It seems too good to be true*! And as it turned out, it **was** too good to be true!

Because, in reality, *this never happened!* The promise was made, the vision set out, but it was not fulfilled. Why? *Not because* God didn't hold up God's end of the bargain. But because the *people* couldn't hold up theirs. For all their hope and longing, they never could become the kind of nation God called them to be. Yes, they were grateful when the blessings were plenty but when God needed them to "do justice, love mercy, to live humbly", as the prophet Micah later reminds them, over and over again, they came up short! They could become the kind of nation God envisioned them to be.

It doesn't take but a few minutes in front of a tv or more than a glance at the headlines to see that the nations of the world in as much or more disarray as they were in Jeremiah's time. A staggering number of nations could use "rebuilding". Venezuela is in turmoil, Syria's a nightmare, Greece is economically imploding. Sudan nears collapse, Italy is once again in a recession, and Britain is far from finding an agreeable compromise with the EU. Israel and Palestine are caught in a never-ending battle, and then what *can* we say about our own country? What *will* it take to rebuild what God designed and humans have torn apart? What will it take for *us* to bring to life the vision God has, the dream Jeremiah proclaims, to our world, or closer yet, our own community—the one right here on this street, the one within our own walls?

These are the very things we were thinking and talking about yesterday. And as we continue to reflect on all that we heard, from God and one another, we continue our thinking about the "work of Christmas", about "God with Us". Howard Thurman's poem invites us to explore what it means to not only *bear witness* to God's Incarnation, to the coming of the Christ among us, but in fact to *be God's Incarnation: to become* Christ to a world in need. We are

looking at ourselves and our society, our culture and our world, and asking difficult questions about what's important and who's included and what it will take so that the healing and restoration Jeremiah foresaw might become reality, beginning here and now, in the circles we travel, in the communities of which we are a part.

Jeremiah's words reflect the struggle; this is *not an easy vision*, a simple fix. "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness," he proclaims. "Grace" is the gift, but the hard truth is not everyone "survived." The prophet tells of the ingathering of people, those who *did* survive, people who have been "lost" to one another, people who have been sent away, driven out, thrown aside...**they will return**. But notice *who* they are, *how* they return: "the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor...with weeping they shall come." These are not the powerbrokers and the wheeler-dealers; not the influential nor the proud. They come not in triumph; they come in grief.

Notice what *isn't* promised: the blind aren't offered sight; the lame are not restored. It isn't necessary. **They can come**. The expectant mother and those already in labor...there is no need for them to hurry; they are **included** here, the path will be made straight, so they don't get tripped up. **They come**. Even those who's grief is inconsolable, **they come too**. This isn't a gathering of perfect people with all the answers, all the resources, all the "right" anything. This is the reunification of a broken people, a hurting people, a vulnerable people who have known the world's hurts and tragedies and **yet live**. There is *room* in this new community for each of them. In God's restorative space, there is no need to be anything other than *who* we are; no need to be other than *what* we are. The promise is for everyone; there is room and resources for all.

And so, **this** is where the work of rebuilding begins. There is, in this text, a sense of homecoming, a sense of coming together as we are; not forgetting the past but incorporating it. Not ignoring our differences but including them. There is an authenticity here not common, in either the biblical text nor in real life. God's work of rebuilding the nations *begins* by creating a new community, a **people**, a people whose authenticity becomes the means by which they are redeemed, a people who become a "watered garden," an *incarnation* of the One who calls them into life; a people with a new sense of mission, of purpose, to heal the world. Rebuilding happens when we incarnate, when we take on, the flesh and spirit of God!

This is the work we are called to! Yesterday we met for an entire day, listening attentively to God's Word and to each other, trusting that God's Spirit was speaking to us through each and all. We were stretched and pulled, looked forward and back, imagined and wondered, started, stopped, and began again. We discerned a direction. We heard an invitation. And now we too are invited to become a new community, to be "rebuilt" --expectant, blind, old, young, halting, energetic, grieving, or with hope!

We are hearing the call to Incarnation; not to some abstract idea about what we believe but to some measurable action that demonstrates who and what God is like. Jeremiah's prophecy gives us a glimpse of what the end results might look like, the creation of a new community, gathered not by ties to the past but hope for the future; fashioned not by what is easy but by what is true; molded not in the image of what is perfect but what is broken. Because *that's* what Incarnation is. *This* is where rebuilding begins.

The work of rebuilding the nations is the work of creating new community—within our walls and beyond them, with those we love and those we haven't met. It begins with accepting each

other as we are, embracing what each has experienced, planting seeds of new relationships that transcend the past and envision a future---a future where God resides, not in spite of us, but **because** of us.

The work of rebuilding the nations begins in our nation, in our neighborhood, on our street. It begins with the folks within our own walls: with CCLU, with YWCA, with Steel River Playhouse. It begins in our relationships in our homes and in our workplaces. The work of rebuilding the nations, of creating life-giving, God-reflecting community begins when we seek justice, not just for ourselves but for all. It begins when we dare to put on paper and then into action our commitment to the LGBTQ community and when we become physically accessible to any who might come. The work of rebuilding the nations happens when we love mercy not because it blesses us, but because it allows us to bless each other. The work of rebuilding the nations begins with each and every one of us, who flesh out the humility and love of God, incarnate, here and now. "I have loved you with an everlasting love," says God. "Therefore, I have committed my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built!" It *almost* sounds too good to be true...but this time **it's not. Believe it;** God is at work in me and you.