

Second Sunday after Christmas

POST-CHRISTMAS BLUES

Jeremiah 31:7-14

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

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." 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Blue as in Bleak

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Down In the Dumps*

As in ancient Jerusalem, so in today's Cleveland, Ohio: folks are feeling blue. Here the holiday narcotic is wearing off and we sit even deeper than we were two months ago in detritus, debt, and isolation. The heap of post-party debris. The decorations, now tired and drab. The wretched awaiting of the next credit card bill. The re-scattering of children and grandchildren to the distant cities they inhabit these days. Shall we sing, dance, make merry, and praise the Lord (vv. 12-13)? We think not. By the way, don't tell us that ancient Israelites had it a whole lot grimmer. They did, but that does nothing to lift our gloom. Recession. Depressed housing values. Ballooning national debt. Ranting pundits. Endless wars abroad. The intractable red/blue thing that cripples our politics and wounds our churches. And on and on. Bah, humbug!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Whining Heart*

Tomorrow looks bleak, in other words, and it's somehow our fault. Or so the prophet likes to tell us (30:14-15), and not just Jeremiah but the secular prophets too, the ones who write on the op-ed page about all those things we should have done but didn't do to avoid the mess we're in. We only half believe them. The other half screams at greedy bankers, stupid neighbors, self-serving politicians, grasping lawyers/doctors/drug companies/ shareholders/unions/media moguls/mortgage peddlers—you name it. It's ABU's fault, as in Anybody But Us. As for me, I'm helpless. A victim of their folly. A pawn in the games that higher powers play. "God, where hidest thou?"

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Beyond Blue*

How quickly we forget. Hasn't the LORD "ransomed Jacob," snatching him again and again from "hands too strong for him" (v.11)? Haven't Jacob's heirs in Christ been granted their own micro-version of the Red Sea passage in Holy Baptism, and can't we also point to countless signals of the "everlasting love" that Jacob enjoys (31:3)? Then again, memory by definition is yesterday's news. All it does for sad sacks is to deepen the gloom about the mess we're in today. Whereupon gloom turns to griping, and griping to groping as in Jacob's incessant scrabble for saviors other than God. "Egypt, anyone? Assyria, perhaps?" (2:18). Or how about the Copenhagen climate conference? Or a different president, another Fed chairman, a new Taliban-specific weapons system? Etc. ad nauseum. "Wickedness!" says the LORD who sees us yet again committing the "apostasies" (2:19) whereby we transfer our hopes from him to tools that he may or may not use, in the process divinizing them (cf. 2:27). The LORD's response? He'll use those very tools to disappoint us, to frustrate us, to make us "know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God" (2:19). Be warned: today's faithless blues is tomorrow's nightmare black. So saith the LORD.

PROGNOSIS: True Blue

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Loyal Royal*

But thanks be to this same LORD and God for "grace in the wilderness" (31:2). Haven't we just finished re-hearing how that grace brought lost shepherds to life on the wild outskirts of Bethlehem? It did so by pointing them to the Gloom Buster, grace personified in David's true heir, the one born in darkness to die in darkness, and in that dying to break the grip of darkness on Jacob's future, and ours. Gloom, guilt, darkness: talk about "hands too strong" for us to escape (v. 11)! God's grace in Christ is to place himself in those hands, i.e. to enter and

suffer the gloom, to own the guilt that gloom engenders and then to eat its penalty. At last! The blue-blooded king, loyal to his calling, who does for Jacob what God's shepherd-king is meant to do (23:4, 33:14-16; cf. last month's text study for Advent 1). So it is that angels are authorized to keep "sing[ing] aloud with gladness for Jacob" (v. 7) the way they did on Christmas night. So it is that Jacob's careless, forgetful heirs will get to hear the song re-sung this Sunday, their bluesy folly notwithstanding.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Toe-Tapping Heart*

And if God has his way, this Sunday's hearing will be this Sunday's believing, as in believing anew, all over again. Were we mourning his absence, bemoaning our helplessness, looking out mournfully on the shabby, tattered world we're still stuck in, Christmas notwithstanding? God has other things in mind for us, as in "joy," "comfort," "gladness" (v. 13). Once again he'll push the repentance project we heard about in Advent, the one where the good news of forgiveness gets us to junk the poor-me ABU wheeze, so pathetic and lame (see Step Two), and instead to stand up like real men and real women, honest and nervy enough to own the iniquity that God itches in Christ in order to scratch from the books and to think about it no more (31:34). Just watch: if preachers preach and hearers hear, some toes will be twitching this Sunday with an urge to dance.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Dispatched to the Dumps*

After all, who can resist that dancing, skipping urge when it finally sinks in, how these days God owns the onus, how the burden of doing is on his strong and gracious back. Notice the verbs of the text, how almost all are in the first person with God as speaker and doer. [Sidebar: let the text be read so the hearers get the staccato repetition: "I will..., I will..., I will...,

I will..." (vv. 9, 13, and 14 in particular, see also vv. 31-34).] "I'm here to save you," beamed God through the baby to those Bethlehem shepherds, "and save you I will." Message heard, promise believed, and after that the streets echoed with the rowdy joy of shepherds singing the angels' song (Luke 2:20). Funny thing is, they did so on the way back to their fields, a re-scattering of the lost-and-found into places drab and dull where God expressly sends them, no, not to wallow and weep but to suffuse the gloom with a new shade of blue, as in Advent blue, that color and feel of hope and promise and salvation so sure you can taste it now. It's the color too of post-Christmas mission, from the "heights of Zion" (v. 12) to the grubby streets of Cleveland to every cranny of the broken bedraggled world where God sees fit to send us as true blue agents of everlasting hope.