

Second Sunday of Christmas, Old Testament, Year C

SO... HERE WE ARE IN BETHLEHEM

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Second Sunday of Christmas

Analysis by Joseph Justus van der Sabb

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: Unradiant

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Some Kind of Gladness

Behold the Savior, Christ the Lord ... hang on a minute... This must be THEN! THAT DAY!

The great homecoming Jeremiah writes of is, frankly, so far-fetched that it could only truly take place amid a cosmic realignment: God behaving in a totally new way toward this planet. The biblical way of talking about this is the coming of the Messiah, the dawning of the New Covenant.

So... Here we are in Bethlehem and this is the claim: That what the shepherds saw and the angels sang was, in fact, the Son of God made man, albeit born in a barn. That God is on the move, and after a couple of rough centuries following the demise of the Old Testament, we're about to get a brand New one. That all that was prophesied, all the hope that has been harbored, it's all coming true. Starting here: Bethlehem. Starting now: this winter's eve.

The remnant of Abraham's seed, a great company scattered through all time and space, are returning home, coming home to their refuge. They're coming on boats and ferries, walking and

arriving by rail. The borders have been opened and the visa requirements are waived. It's "All are actually welcome!" And just listen, Hark! the refugees are weeping for joy as they march, and singing as they straggle! There are no-expense-spared feasts prepared in advance for them, tables upon tables filled with succulent meats, fatty fatty goodness, grain breads, rich wine. (Apparently none of these refugees are vegetarian, glucose intolerant, alcoholic or on one of those weird anti-fat diets.) The girls are radiant, remembering what God has done for them, and it has got them dancing, and I'm not talking yawns and forced smiles, the half-hearted tapping of feet in pews... they're rejoicing in their dance! The men are, wait for it, merry! at ... umm... coffee hour!

Or not.

Not at all.

A better diagnosis would be that we're the same sorry lot that turned Eden into an uninhabitable wilderness. Here we are, at the dawn of 2016, violently keeping the starving from the Table, poisoning the brooks, wandering from the path, subdividing the one flock for profit, gorging on the tender flesh of flock and herd, overpaying those who underwork, underpaying those who are overworked, stockpiling it all, striking down those with child, those who labor, bombing the lame as they lie in hospital ... to the ends of the earth... You know: same old, same old.

And yet they sing on about God's Peace on God's Earth?! Geez!

At least there are fewer of them around these days. Remember how we rolled our eyes at those American taxpayers who waved their righteous little American fists about “Merry Christmas” in Wal-Mart... because really? Merry? Jolly mirth? Around here? Who’s been “merry” while sober? Taxes that sent out the drones, the missiles, the gunships. To kill human beings. Yup. Merry Christmas and Peace on Earth, ya’ll.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Unsatisfied

So Bethlehem happened, but let’s be honest; Joy to the World didn’t. This is the LORD’s bounty? Doesn’t look like much. So I look to the sweat of my brow and the satisfaction of my own hard won bounty, my own alliances, my own personal security, my own paltry righteousness. And look at us now, new lords who have moved in on Roman / Babylonian / Assyrian turf. Aren’t we the very wolves who prowl the wintered earth?

And in the dark, aren’t we, paradoxically, the blind, maimed child who cries for lack of hope?

This bounty that Jeremiah prophesied, that the angels sang—the LORD’s bounty—it’s been a long time coming and it’s just not here yet. And we, frankly, are not satisfied, not comforted, not joyous. And if she can’t dance, what’s a girl to do?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Languishing

It’s obvious. We are the desperate remnant and we haven’t been

brought home from the wilderness, weeping in repentant relief. Looking at the lay of the land, we're not entering this Canaan of "comfort" anytime soon. In fact, this is going to get a lot worse before it gets any better.

And it did get a lot worse. Fast. Because it really was happening. The Messiah, the Son of God, had been born on planet earth. The welcome was a bit unrehearsed and most of the UN didn't even bother to send congratulations. And the rest of the story is worth telling, worth hearing, on this of all days. Because it ends very badly. This is how worse things got: The Messiah, sent to usher in Jeremiah's luminous vision and change reality was declared a fake and a fraud. Folks back then would rather languish, unsatisfied, than listen with open ears. Even his closest friends couldn't get themselves together to keep the Son of God from being executed by a bunch of stinking Romans. It was a total victory for human cussedness. Glimpsing the Vision, we opted for ... this. No one left to even sing with Jeremiah: Save, O LORD, your people.

And now we spend our lives pushing farfetched rumors of lasting peace and radiant joy and genuine togetherness off into some unknowable future, beyond even death. "There, there. [Pat, pat.] We'll rest in peace once we get to ... umm... heaven." Resigned, now, to life as it unfolds upon us. Distinctly un-radiant over the supposed goodness of the LORD. We endure. This is as good as it gets.

O little town of Bethlehem, we see you now. Still and useless.

Come to think of it, Crucify, crucify starts to make a lot more sense.

PROGNOSIS: Bounty that Satisfies

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): He Will Gather Them and Keep Them

So. Here we are in Bethlehem. A good place to begin. To ponder the homecoming vision of Jeremiah and how it is unfulfilled... to this day. To watch the tear in the heavens where the glory shone through, hoping for just a moment more. To stand in this far away place, in the hold of the Church, and to wonder what any of this means in light of the Messiah's resurrection and ascent to the throne of heaven where he stands on my behalf.

For what could it be but amazing love, beyond any words, that God would endure THIS in the attempt to gather not only these people, but all people, for this homecoming feast? And, to be sure, the attempt sure looks like it's failing. The saints aren't marching in quite yet. And yet, if it can be said this way, God yet endures. And God did not fail to gather and to keep the First of them all, his Own Beloved Son, and just so, God has not failed with so many other beloved sons and daughters. Amid storms and tribulations: they were gathered and kept. While executioners swords swing down: they are gathered and kept. While cancer ravages and hearts break, good God, this promise endures... for it is the heart of God: I will gather and keep.

You.

O for the ears to hear this rightly! For don't we look through sin-dark glass and see (and trust) overmuch our own ugly guts instead of trusting the very glory of the Creator: the crucified yet risen stableborn Savior?

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Satisfied

Satisfaction is a strange creature. Is it what God gives us, altering our desires to conform to his gifts? Is it what God gives us, even when our desires do not conform to his gifts? Or is satisfaction what we struggle to beat from this poor world, our every whim sated, our three wishes granted, our separate appetites catered for just so? And what if God is giving us what he desires for us, would that satisfy any of us? Genuine satisfaction is so rare, so regal, that it must be recognized as a gift of God.

The homecoming satisfaction that Jeremiah is describing cannot be the satisfaction of bodily cravings, for fatty fatty goodness, for relief from physical weariness, for the quenching of the greatest thirst... though it perhaps can and must be those also. This bounty that will satisfy is none other than the bounty of the righteousness of Christ. To know that I have one who stands for me. To be with faith (con fides) that as surely as God did not forsake his Beloved Son, so I too will not be forsaken. That home ... is this home. And this home... is my home. Somehow, I'm already there.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): By Brooks of Water

“I will let them walk by brooks of water... I will let them walk” (v. 9). Call it a privilege, an opportunity, a once in a lifetime chance. We have more than permission to walk, we have been given this life for the express purpose that we walk. Walk? Umm, ok. Walk where? Wherever the paths do lead, beside quiet brooks and into barren wastelands, upon a warming planet and into wolves’ dens. Coming, at last, as refugees ourselves, welcomed into an eternal home. Ok, not a dry eye in the house. Sounds fantastic. Walk with whom? Maybe a better question. Walking, marching, straggling, taking in the cosmic grandeur with this host of singing refugees, this company of wounded dancers, this band of those who tabernacle in wild places. God’s water springs forth from stone, we take it in our hands and watch as God makes gardens flourish in parched places.

Is this the right recipe for fearless joy? Will hearts at home in Christ be hearts that experience satisfaction, completeness and gladness? Will our tables be open, our welcomes true and loving, not caged in fear? Will men be merry? Will anyone dare to rejoice in this dance? Or is it all too soon...

Next year in Bethlehem.