

Second Sunday of Christmas

THE RETURN OF THE REMNANT

Jeremiah 31:7-14

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

7For 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.

DIAGNOSIS: The Scattering

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Words for Those Stumbling on the Way*

Jeremiah is hard. It is a difficult, difficult book with a very disturbing message. It is especially offensive for those who are in troubled situations and who are going under. Those are precisely the people to whom it is addressed: the exiles in Babylon, taken after the initial defeat of Judah by the Babylonians; and those left behind in Jerusalem under a king appointed by the Babylonians but chafing under their authority and ready to rebel. If Jeremiah is to address us, we have to ask ourselves, "What forces have defeated us in this church or in this country, and under whose authority are we chafing?" For many of us it is money, dreams of big numbers dashed by dwindling returns on investment, or maybe it's debt, struggles with insurance, mortgages, eviction, and unemployment, in short, the economic system. We feel our servitude to this system especially at Christmas time.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Refusal to Turn Around*

Jeremiah brings a word from the LORD to us: Surrender. What!? In spite of all the hatred it earned him, Jeremiah brought God's word relentlessly to his people: "You cannot defeat the system that you have made and nurtured, sacrificed to and worshiped. You are enmeshed in it and it has become too strong for you. You have trusted other gods and have not lived justly, according to my commandments. You will have to go down, down to the bottom with all the victims you have offered up to the system and all the slaves whose lives you have not counted. Be with them now, learn what it is like, and work for their well-being. Do not try to save yourselves. You cannot." But the people rejected

Jeremiah's word as the word of a traitor and collaborator. The king imprisoned him lest he aid the enemy, the Babylonians. The people prepared to fight in order to preserve themselves. It is not natural to choose repentance or to risk letting go of whatever has sustained us (sometimes at great cost) in the past. Do we not prefer self-preservation without repentance? Denial instead of change?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Ending Far Away from God, Others, and Ourselves*

So the word from the LORD through Jeremiah became even more harsh: "You will die violently. I will not allow you to continue as you are. I will put an end to it—to you. Whoever survives will be scattered and stripped of identity until there is only a remnant, lame, blind, and in tears. I will make sure to let your system do what it does so that its consequences play out and you are brought to nothing." Jeremiah reveals God as the "traitor" and the "enemy" of the people because God will not bless their efforts.

PROGNOSIS: The Gathering

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Gathering up of the Remnant from the Farthest Parts of the Earth*

But Jeremiah's message does not stop there because Jeremiah's God is the one who creates out of nothing. The LORD goes on to promise a future for this rag-tag remnant, now called "a great company" (v. 8). With these words, Jeremiah was envisioning the eventual return of the remnant from exile back home. But this remnant has become an even greater company than Jeremiah envisioned. At Christmas, God the Son was born as Jesus to take up the whole story of his people, Israel, into his own life. He claimed their law, their sin, their subjugation, their defeat, their death, and their loss. In his resurrection Jesus also claimed their exodus from slavery, their freedom, their return,

and their new and transformed life, promised by God. In his return to his disciples, Jesus, scarred but living, filled them with his own divine Spirit so that they, too, could live with new hearts. Jesus told them to spread his story around to all in exile. It is the story of God's Word embodied and enacted, and God's promises fulfilled. Everywhere that Word went, the Spirit sprung up in people's hearts. The tattered ones of the earth were gathered and saved in Christ, thus becoming children of God, who is the "father to Israel" (v. 9). They have been comforted and guided by the Holy Spirit from that time until now, a great company indeed, now not only the remnant of Jacob but of all the peoples, including us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Return on the Straight Path*

Like Jesus Christ we, who share God's DNA, who are encoded with God's wisdom by the Holy Spirit, will experience humility turned to bounty, mourning turned to joy, languishing turned to watering, because Christ did. But as long as there is sin and injustice in the world we cannot experience only bounty and joy. To do so would be to take our eyes off our troubled brothers and sisters and to leave them behind. This is the road that eventually leads to defeat, destruction, and exile. We need Jeremiah to remind us that even when God leads the people back home with consolation on a straight path, they are never to forget the route by which they went into exile (31:22). When they see that path toward exile opening ahead, it is time for repentance, time to turn back and be humbled and remember that God is the Savior.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Words for the Great, Radiant Company*

Jeremiah describes the life God promised for the people raised from the dead and returned from exile. It is not like the old life under the old system. They no longer fear what the system

may do to them. They no longer trust in what the system promises them. They have been ransomed and redeemed from the system. It has no more power over them. They are now the flock of God the Good Shepherd, who carries them in Jesus' life. God's radiant people make sure to leave no one in the shadows or in the cold. Blind, lame, pregnant, in labor, sad, women, men, young, old, priests and all the people are provided for and given a reason to sing and dance and be glad. God turns God's children back toward the lowest, the weakest, those who are "nothing" in the eyes of the world because it is God's work to make something out of nothing and to raise the dead. In this way even the humblest community may be the "chief of the nations" (v. 7), for this does not depend on military or economic might but on God's gracious work.