

Joyful Returns
January 2, 2022
Jeremiah 31:7-14
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This time of year has many celebrations and important transitions in our lives. Whether we realize it fully or not we mark the return of the Light, like we hear in John's Gospel. The Winter Solstice, Christmas and Epiphany all center around the coming of the light once again. The longest night has past and we look expectantly toward to coming spring when the earth comes alive again with greenery. Now that really is several months away but still we celebrate the significance of light in our lives with these holidays. We also mark the ending of one year and the beginning of another as a time for reflection, celebration and renewed commitments to being better people. Many of us even stayed up till the strike of midnight to observe the beginning of 2022. We kissed loved ones and made toasts to better times ahead.

All of these events give us hope for the coming year. Hope for better times ahead, prayers for more health and success and enjoying the company of family both near and far. It is fitting then that we hear these words of hope in Jeremiah's reading today. This passage comes from what is called Jeremiah's book of Consolation which is chapters 30 and 31 in our bibles. Jeremiah had good reason to write such words of hope and joy for the people of Israel. They had been in exile for several decades and Jeremiah is prophesying that God will be bringing the people out of exile and back to their homeland.

In some ways we may relate to the feelings that the people of Israel may have at this time. They have gone many years feeling cut off from their homeland, relatives, and feeling cut off from their holy sites. Being in exile that long, they learned to adapt and find creative ways to stay devoted to their faith and people. They became more self-sufficient in practicing and passing on the faith to their children. Most of all they also had time to reflect on what it truly meant to be a Jewish person in a foreign land. They took time to re-evaluate life in many ways.

We too through these past few years have felt cut off from people we love and care about. As a church we went over a year without in-person worship relying on ZOOM and YouTube to stay connected. We too worked to adapt our world to make this time more bearable. Even still today, many of us avoid or limit the types of crowd gatherings we attend and some are still not sure about joining us in-person and we miss them. I noticed on Christmas Eve we had several families join us that we have not seen in church for many months. I and others welcomed them back with joyful greetings and conversation trying to make up for lost time.

As your pastor, I have been calling on members we have lost touch with, and often times we have warm and wonderful times of reconnection. It is an odd time as our congregation is in different phases of COVID Exile. We are seeing more people venture out, but others hold onto the practices they adapted to and stay connected remotely. But each reconnection and visit experiences a burst of joy and celebration as we celebrate our shared faith and love of our East Church community.

In reading Jeremiah's words this morning one of the phrases that stands out to me is "I will turn their mourning into laughter and their sadness into joy."

Throughout these past two years we have experienced the great amounts of sorrow and struggle. Loss of life, sadness over missed celebrations and the

many changes in life that have happened in our absence have been cried over as we made countless hard decisions, weighing the risks of going or avoiding these events. It has been emotionally taxing for all of us. I take comfort in God's promises here that our sadness will be replaced with joy and laughter once again. Each new advancement of protection brings joy and each new setback like Omicron brings another wave of delay and sadness.

The joy of reunions are always fun to see and experience. I remember when I came home from Germany on my brother's birthday. I had convinced him I was staying another month, but instead planned a surprise with a big box and bow and all. My sister snuck me into the breezeway and then brought him to the box ununwrap his big gift. I had on a special German firefighter's hat that glows in the dark, so at first this is all he saw, until I stood up. He was in shock for half an hour afterward. I had been gone for two years. We talked for days about all of my experiences and the ways I had grown up while gone.

Life experiences change us and shape us in new ways. We have learned a lot about the ways we as humans respond to such struggles. Some good some bad. The competing challenges of earning a living, staying safe, caring for others, staying well informed, avoiding misinformation, and holding onto some semblance of a normal life has been difficult. For many of us some things have changed forever as we have re-evaluated what is most important to us.

I am impressed how the Israelite exiles have changed too. It shows up in this verse, "Among them will be the blind and the disabled, expectant mothers and those in labor. A great throng will return here." It points to not only God's concern for the blind, disabled, and pregnant, but it also shows the people were not willing to leave anyone behind. The people that would slow them down or be neglected, were cherished and invaluable. The people had learned to measure their

progress by the needs of the weakest and most vulnerable among them. I wonder if their exile taught them this important value?

So I ask you, how has this past year or two changed you? What priorities and values been re-ordered because of these trying times? What adaptations have you incorporated into your daily life? Has your faith and prayer life changed? In what ways have you been shocked or surprised by your behavior or the behavior of others?

As we embark on this new year how can we continue to support each other as we slowly come out of this COVID exile? How can we help one another keep the faith even in the midst of our anxieties and set backs? What are the new priorities we are adopting that support the most vulnerable among us and express the love of Christ to our community today?

As we start 2022 let us pray that this is the year of deliverance from our COVID Exile and pray for the safe return of one another. Let us take time to look back and learn from our short comings and our successes. Let us also look forward and embrace the call of God to be the light and hope of the world as we share the love of Christ to all. Let us turn tears into laughter and sadness into shouts of Joy as we celebrate God with us through it all.