

1.02.22 –Christmastide II
“Joy and Assurance of God”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Jeremiah 31:7-14 (NIV) ~ Pam

⁷ This is what the Lord says:

“Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.

Make your praises heard, and say,
‘Lord, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.’

⁸ See, I will bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.

Among them will be the blind and the lame,
expectant mothers and women in labor;
a great throng will return.

⁹ They will come with weeping;
they will pray as I bring them back.

I will lead them beside streams of water
on a level path where they will not stumble,
because I am Israel’s father,
and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

¹⁰ “Hear the word of the Lord, you nations;
proclaim it in distant coastlands:

‘He who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.’

¹¹ For the Lord will deliver Jacob
and **redeem** them from the hand of those stronger than they.

¹² They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—
the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.

They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more.

¹³ Then young women will dance and be glad,
young men and old as well.

I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them **comfort and joy** instead of sorrow.

¹⁴ I will satisfy the priests with abundance,
and my people will be filled with my bounty,”
declares the Lord.

L: These are Joyful, Prophetic Words from God! C: Thanks be to God.

John 1:1-9 (NKJV) ~ Pam

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

John's Witness: The True Light

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name *was* John. ⁷ This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. ⁸ He was not that Light, but *was sent* to bear witness of that Light. ⁹ That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.

L: These are profound words of God! C: Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, we come today on the first Sunday of a New Year, 2022. Let us recognize the importance of a new beginning, but only because you sent your son Jesus to us at Christmas. We gather to thank you for Him, to thank you for our holidays, and to be in your presence for worship, praise, and assurance. Let us clear our minds to hear a message of hope. Help those not with us today to feel your presence and assurance wherever they are. Lord, speak now through your messenger. **“Amen.”**

Happy New Year! Some of you may have had to make last minute adjustments to your celebrations or decided for health to spend the time alone. In any case, I hope you had a renewing and welcoming optimistic start to the New Year. Again, thank you to all of you who made United's Advent and Christmas season special this year; and to those who couldn't be here for good reasons, we missed you!

“Resilient” was our descriptor for Christmas Eve and the year 2021; and aptly, our OT passage to begin this new year deals with resilience and restoration. We saw airport reunions of families this Christmas; and as 2022 begins with an Omicron surge, we need restoration like the exiles of Jeremiah's day. Though the kingdoms were divided into Israel (to the north) and Judah (to the south), people fled east and west too. God assures them all that He will restore her and return Jerusalem to Israel. The long years of captivity and exile will be redeemed as God gives rest

to Israel. Why? Because of His **love** for Israel and for us. Let us remember that in our own two years of isolation, we have **never** lost God's love. God will redeem the time; what is going on now is only temporary.

The prophet uses 3 “word pictures” that might be goals for us too:

1.) God will initiate a time of **renewed joy**. The closer we are to His presence, the more joyful we will be. It is a choice.

2.) God will bring about a **time of peace and prosperity**; hopeful words as he instructs the people to replant the vineyards. What will we re-plant as we *move forward*?

3.) The isolated will experience a time of **renewed commitment to God**. Those gone will be summoned back to worship God. Who might you invite back to worship with us?

Verses 7-9 declare that God will gather His people from wherever they've gone, and will restore the lame, heal the blind, the sick, and provide for their needs. They will be refreshed by streams of water and level ground. Verses 10-14 describe Israel's re-gathering as a renewal of material blessings, abundant crops, and large flocks of sheep. This bounty will bring “comfort and joy” like we sang in the Victorian Christmas carol, “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” (let nothing you dismay . . .). Their journeys back would NOT have the same hazards their ancestors experienced in Moses' wilderness journey; God would protect and deliver them.

Can we tie a thread between the hope of this prophecy and our own world? I believe we can draw hope from these words for our society, this church, and ourselves. The word “redeem,” in verse 11, meant that a relative would purchase the indebted property for a fellow kinsman to

relieve his debt. We speak of Jesus Christ as kinsman redeemer; and we just celebrated His divine birth!

The prologue of John 1 defines who Jesus was and is. The life of Christ, especially as His ministry began, transcends our human understanding of God-on-earth in the form of a person. The “*Logos*,” Greek for “Word,” does not just represent God, but is the power of God, the wisdom of God, and the Gospel (Good News) of God all rolled into one. Through the eyes of Jesus, who saved us from our debt of sinfulness, the Jeremiah prophecy begins to make more sense. The Word, *Logos*, preceded creation itself, as He was with God before creation! You may recall from Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.³ And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

Darkness in the world is presumed to exist already. It was Light that came into it, not the other way around. In our most challenging circumstances, don’t we feel the darkness approaches us and shadows everything good? We must stop saying these things: “a storm is brewing; I have a cloud over me, etc.” These are incorrect yet existential comments. Are you a glass half-empty or glass half-full sort of person? This new year, how does your faith stack up? God does not create disease in our lives, or financial crises. They exist, so how we deal with them determines our light in the world. Our Light is Jesus and our relationship with Him. Our response is a choice; we can react in anger, despair, or in compassion and love to flooding after tornado damage, unexpected wildfires, or cancelled flights. Calvary was the darkest day ever, yet

Christianity has survived 2000 years, and although in some areas, it is diminishing, it is exploding in other parts of the world!

Darkness shall not overcome the Light. John the Baptist came to prepare the world for the Light of Jesus, the Messiah, “that all might believe through him (v.9).” Perhaps, our own diverse community needs the Light of Jesus that only we can give them! We do not worship, take communion, or renew our covenant just to make ourselves feel good; we do these to refuel our faith and courage to face the existing darkness of the world for the week and the New Year. We are committed to worship and mission because Christ commanded us to be, by renewing our hearts and minds with HIS LIGHT through Scripture! We regather (like the Israelites) to experience the blessings God promises in Jeremiah, Isaiah, and John, yes, but more so that we may share them with others who do not know Jesus. We have dreamed dreams for our church; COVID has pruned us and made room for new things and new people. So, this year, let us listen carefully for God’s work in this community, using your unique spiritual gifts. He will shed light on how we can co-labor or collaborate to do new work He has made available to us. It is a new year to re-envision, re-evaluate, refresh, and LISTEN for God’s direction. Mission work is ageless and boundless. “ ‘ . . . my people will be filled with my bounty,’ declares the Lord.” Christ is here with us and will come again. Remember that the God of life and creation itself exists through Jesus Christ, whose spirit comes to **visible life through you and your actions!** Will you Listen for the Work? // **Let us pray,**

Dear Jesus, we love you, and thank you for being “Emmanuel, God with us.” Help us to spend more time with you in silence and in your Word.

Help us to carve out the time to listen and find discernment as a body.
Please keep us healthy physically, emotionally, and spiritually so that we
can continue to do your Kingdom work here on earth. In your name, we
pray and abide, **Amen.**