

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH
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Jeremiah 31:7-14

This is what the LORD says: "Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations. Make your praises heard, and say, 'O LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel.' 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. 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. "Hear the word of the LORD, O nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands: 'He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.' For the LORD will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they. 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 oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. Then maidens 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. I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty," declares the LORD.

Psalms 147:12-20

Extol the LORD, O Jerusalem; praise your God, O Zion, for he strengthens the bars of your gates and blesses your people within you. He grants peace to your borders and satisfies you with the finest of wheat. He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes. He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can with-

stand his icy blast? He sends his word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow. He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the LORD.

Those of you who are culturally sophisticated will, no doubt, remember the TV show that debuted in the summer of 1969, Hee Haw. I will not force you to admit to watching it, but all of you will probably remember that one of the segments was introduced by a song with these lyrics, *Gloom, despair and agony on me-e!*
Deep dark depression, excessive misery-y!
If it weren't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all!
Gloom, despair and agony on me-e-e!"

I mention that song because it could serve as a theme song for the scripture passages read today. Both the passage from Jeremiah and the one from Psalm 147 have, as background, the ideas of human helplessness and hopelessness.

Jeremiah prophesied during the time of one of the greatest crises of the Jewish people. Led by King Josiah, the nation of Judah, along with many other smaller nations in the region, revolted against their Assyrian masters. Two unfortunate things happened that doomed this attempt at liberty. In 609 BCE, Josiah was killed in a battle with the Egyptians. Then, in 605 BCE, the Babylonians defeated Egypt and conquered the old Assyrian Empire.

The dominance of the Babylonians led to the first deportation of Jewish leaders to Babylon in 597 BCE. In 587 BCE, just 10 years later, the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem and took even more Jewish families into exile. All that was left in the land of Judah was a remnant of hopeless and helpless people. The people who had been transported to Babylon were also hopeless and helpless.

Psalm 137 was composed during this time of deportation and exile and

reflects the emotional despair of the Jews. In that Psalm, we read such things as: “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept” and “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” This was the emotional context in which the voice of Jeremiah came.

Jeremiah stayed in Jerusalem with the “leftovers” of the nation of Judah. The prophet understood the defeat, the despair, and the abandonment felt by the people. Moreover, he knew of the silence of their voices. The people believed that all voices of possibility had been crushed. Why even bother to pray to God, since it was so evident that God had abandoned them and no longer would hear their voice?

The old reality of the people was as bleak as it could be. Then came these words of exuberant praise describing the new reality and the new hope of God’s work in the world.

Proclaiming the message of God, Jeremiah tells the nation to sing aloud, to shout for joy, to proclaim the message of God, to give praise for God’s works, and to pass along the message given to them. God intervenes in the dismal reality of life to liberate the people and to bring about an unexpected new life. The power of the Babylonian Empire over the people will be broken. God will save God’s covenant people. God will gather the exiles from every corner of the globe. No one will be left out. Even the blind and the lame – those who were vulnerable and dependent – who thought they would never again have a place will be brought home to God’s place.

As a result of the new act of God in the world, this new life will flourish and the power of fear and death will be broken. At that time, creation will blossom and bring forth an abundance of grain, wine, olive oil, and flocks. At that time, the people – both young and old – will join together in joyous celebrations. And, at that time, the community of the faithful, the religious ones, will prosper beyond all expectations. Jeremiah proclaimed that the old is past and the new has come.

Psalm 147 paints a similar picture. Using the metaphor of cold weather, the Psalmist tells us what it is like in the old world. In the old, humankind is subjected to a perpetual and painful winter. How well we can understand. The land is covered with snow. Frost is scattered about as ashes. Hail falls from the skies like crumbs from the table. The last part of verse 17 asks plaintively, “Who can stand before God’s cold?”

The word of hope comes to the people in verse 18. As one scholar suggests, we could paraphrase it in this way: “As the warm spring winds blow to melt the ice and snow of winter, so the Spirit of God melts all that is frozen in human life.”

Spiritually speaking, the old is a frozen world – lifeless, gray, covered with snow. The new will be a world brought to life by God’s intervention, even before human beings ask for help, and will be characterized by peace within our borders and prosperity.

While both Jeremiah and the writer of Psalm 147 spoke to an ancient people in a world far removed from us, these passages still can speak to us because of our faithful assertion that, in Christmas, God has come to us and caused a new world to come into being. God has brought us out of exile from the old and brought us into a life of exuberant joy in the new. The darkness of the old has been vanquished by the light of the Christ child who has come to us in the new. No longer need we wander without direction for God has sent God’s star to guide those who are seeking the truth of God’s presence.

Dear people of God, on this day, especially, we give praise for the new – the new world, the new life, the new joy, and the new hope we have. No longer must we live in gloom, despair, agony, or misery. Like the Wise Men described in the Gospel of Matthew, we too will be guided by God to worship in truth. As we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion, we are reminded of the work of God’s Spirit reconciling us to God and to one another. Come, dear people, and rejoice in the work of God in bringing about this new thing. AMEN.