Jeremiah 31:7-14 (NRSVue)

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 where 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 does 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.

Every Good Gift

This is the Second Sunday of Christmas, and with it, we remember several things. Last week, Kate McShane preached on John 1, when in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. And this week we recognize and remember the three Magi that came to Jesus on Epiphany, bringing him gifts in return for the gift that he brought them. The joyful declaration that God is the giver of every good gift appears in each of this week's readings. And again, we read in this passage from Jeremiah, another gift from God: life itself, even in the midst of difficult and uncertain times. It would seem that from the written word to the Word Incarnate, it is impossible to separate the gifts of the Spirit from the Spirit itself. It is impossible to separate life and creativity from the creative Word of God, or the Giver from the gifts. But Jeremiah 31:7-14 encourages us to focus on such a time when both the Giver and the gifts appear to have been lost forever. Let's talk about that.

Would you please pray with me? …

This passage comes from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. It's a part of Jeremiah's larger narrative, in which he foretells of destruction for the ways in which Judah and Israel have been unfaithful to God, and offers a promise of hope amidst that destruction. Immediately, this might be ringing a few of our alarm bells. It certainly does for me. Because this is a very common theme in Jeremiah, and throughout the other major prophets. If you've heard me preach on any of the prophets before, and I certainly have, you might remember me saying that prophets speak to their contemporary people about what is happening in the present. In other words, they read the writing on the wall in terms of their actions and their effects on their relationship with one another and with God. We can be sure that, whenever a prophet is talking, they are probably talking simultaneously about the way things are, and the way things could be, either good or bad. So, it would seem, is the case with Jeremiah, in this morning's scripture.

The book of Jeremiah is long and winding, and covers several main topics from many different angles. At their core, Jeremiah's words are concerned with two things: the straying of the people of Israel and Judah from the word and law of God, and the rampant social injustice that is a result of their abandoning God's commandments. As such, Jeremiah seems to be doing two things, and often finds himself operating out of two camps: troubling the comfortable, and comforting the troubled. He is troubling the comfortable rich, the abusers of the law and those in lower social classes, and the religious leaders who abuse their power. To them, he says that a curse is coming. In fact, it's already here, and they are being punished for their iniquities with war, famine, displacement, and general upheaval. Israel has already fallen to Babylon, and Judah, where Jeremiah lives and works, is on its way to the same fate.

But to those who are being abused, who have been displaced through no fault of their own, Jeremiah preaches a related, though altogether different, story. To those who have been abused or mistreated by the rulers of Judah, by those who wield their power unlawfully or in a way that is contrary to God's will, they will be elevated. Those who are dispersed or exiled, will be brought back. And there is this dichotomy that Jeremiah establishes of God, being both the

lion who devours the sheep, and the shepherd who protects the flock from danger. Despite what seems to be an obvious contradiction, God apparently acts as both. Whether protecting the people from danger, or providing the danger in the first place, Jeremiah seems to assert that God is behind it. Perhaps this is why he seems to operate out of those two modes of operation: troubling the comfortable and comforting the troubled.

At first glance, and perhaps at even this deeper level of reading, this morning's passage places itself squarely in the latter camp of Jeremiah's points—he is very much comforting the troubled at this point, that even though they have experienced misfortune at the hands of others, God will still deliver them. But, this implies a counterpoint: woe to those who started this! They're getting their comeuppance now!

Throughout all of his speeches and writings, Jeremiah makes the case repeatedly that the inhabitants of Judah are experiencing what they deserve. This might sound like a harsh picture of the God that we know. To put a different perspective on it, it is possible that language surrounding the covenant, as well as the general injustices in Judah, had been going on so long and become so saturated with injury that the covenant could no longer convey any hope of reconciliation.

In other words, the situation had become so hopeless, that it felt foolish to hope for anything but destruction. Perhaps the wealthy manipulated the poor, or the politically powerful sowed division among the marginalized. Perhaps the people—all people—had become apathetic to violence among them. No matter what happened, possibly, such hurt became so commonplace that the people simply stopped hoping for change, and started hoping for a clean slate. That feels familiar to me, too.

But it might be worth it to consider that Jeremiah *doesn't* exclude those who broke the covenant in the first place. In fact, he seems to include them explicitly. One word betrays this better than any other: Ephraim. Ephraim was the second son of Joseph, who somewhat famously fell away from God into idolatry and spiritual unfaithfulness. His name also quite literally means "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." With his name alone, whom the ancient Judahites and Israelites certainly would have known, we already know two things: the people who have been dispersed include those who have strayed from the covenant, and have gone to a land of adversity.

The minor prophet Hosea similarly speaks of Ephraim in his writings. He images God tenderly teaching Ephraim to walk, just like a parent. But God becomes infuriated when Ephraim grows up and rebels, and God agonizes over what to do. At first, God decides to disown Ephraim, but eventually determines to put away that wrath—after all, God is God.[1] But the way that Jeremiah writes about Ephraim and the claiming of God's own by God, regardless of what they have done, speaks volumes to God's character. It speaks even more to our own qualities of being the beloved children of God.

My point, is that despite all this brokenness, all the harm caused and done and felt, God takes charge, with the power and love of a parent. Even the most intimate bonds can be broken,

[1] Hosea 11:8-9.

but God reestablishes this bond here and now. God is asserted as the father, intending to bring the remnant who has gone astray, or been lost, home. Considering all that's happened between Judah and God, the most striking thing is that those who broke the covenant, and are according to Jeremiah directly responsible for the calamity that's taking place, are still considered the children of God. They are not forsaken, even though they seem to have forsaken God.

This is a powerful message. A covenant can be broken, and a rebellious child can strain a parent's patience to the breaking point, and yet, God resolves to resume this relationship. God's decision to claim paternity in verse 9 suggests the possibility of beginning again where all hope had been lost.

What's more, God's deliverance of those exiles back to their homeland is deeply rooted in conceptions of family, and familial responsibility. When God redeems and rescues those who had been scattered, it is not as a warrior, or a king, or even a lord of the covenant. Instead, God acts as Jacob's next of kin: "For I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn… ransomed Jacob and redeemed him from hands too strong for him." This language, in Ancient Hebrew, was very closely associated with the "redemption" of relatives—literally, acting as next of kin for family members who were estranged from their family, for one reason or another. So God acts not only as a shepherd, but a Father. God, our parent, comes to bring the children home who have gone astray. Though this is not painless, this is the promise that God makes and continues to keep, for all children of God: for Israel, for Judah, for us.

God promises, in spite of all that has happened and been done, to deliver those who have been exiled from Israel. In a time of war, God promises peace. In a time of upheaval, God promises calm. Not only will the remnants of Israel return, not only are they ransomed and redeemed, but they rejoice. God turns their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and give them gladness for their sorrow. After all, God is both the lion and the shepherd, and we are the sheep. But out of the misfortune and scattering of the people, out of troubles comes immense joy. God reverses misfortunes, and where there is sadness, there is gladness. Out of all things, creative, destructive, comes life, and with it, every good gift from God.

Thus is the theological epiphany of the Israelites: the one who, out of divine love may see us into a time of mourning, will see us through it to a time of joy. Bad things do happen, yes. I think absolutely no one knew that better than the ancient Israelites. But so do good things. And God bears that weight of pain, of sorrow and mourning, alongside us. This is the promise of God, the covenant made with the people of God and expanded through Christ: that through all things, bad and good, God is with us. And in all things, with every good gift, we are able to endure and praise God through them.

God's gathered people will come home. Like a river, they are alive, moving and flowing and teeming with life and radiance and joy, moving freely and in unity toward the source of that joy: God, the giver and sustainer of all good things. They return to God, who even through the broken covenant, through the repentance and tribulation, has remained with them. God has not forsaken them, and has brought them together again.

So let us rejoice! The people of God are together again! Friends, we are together again, and we remain the people of God. Though it will not always be easy, we can delight in every good gift, knowing it is from God. So let us love God and one another, as the created beings of the Word. And let us share the love of God with our neighbors, that all may know that the God of joy, and love, and light, and every good thing, is come.

For if these good things are wrought from the destruction, if the people have been delivered from their scattering and displacement back to wholeness, then Jeremiah's words to Judah this morning reflect a creative aspect in God's deliverance. This message anticipates the coming of God, the creation of new life. These recollected people of God are not simply created, but redeemed, nurtured, and sustained, and all images of God—Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Father, Son, Holy Spirit—converge into one.

As in the beginning, when there was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate the gifts from the Giver, all of which are goodness itself. Amen.