

Rejoicing as God's Restored Remnant

23rd Sun. after Pent. – 10/27/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Jeremiah 31:7-9 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 9, [Yahweh promises His remnant people,] **“...with pleas for mercy I will lead them back, I will lead them to streams of water and by a sure way so that they will not stumble, because I am a Father to Israel...”**

Introduction

✘ Imagine growing up in the same house your entire childhood and then years after you moved out, when your parents have both died, you inherit that home and decide to live there with your family. Several years later, you need to enter the attic above the garage to make a repair. You have never before been in the attic before. And when you enter with your flashlight, you are surprised to find a number of paintings. There's actually one that you like a lot. So, you decide to have it reframed and cleaned up so you can put it on a prominent wall in your living room. When you go to pick it up at the restoration business the person asks, “Did you know that this painting is a priceless original that was thought to be lost?”

→ You can't believe it. This treasure was in the house all those years – in the attic! And you could have been enjoying it all this time.

✘ Friends, that's the kind of feeling I experienced this week when I started digging deeply into our Old Testament Reading today. It has been right there in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 31 all this time. But for the last 28 years of my pastoral ministry, this lovely little treasure of a text has gone underappreciated. Not once have I taken it up to preach upon it – until today.

→ Why? Well, it's this time of year, depending upon how the Sunday's fall on the calendar, that we are usually celebrating Reformation or All Saints Sunday, so these standard Readings for the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost just kind of stay, unnoticed in the Liturgical Attic.

✘ But no longer! We are delaying our Reformation and All Saints celebrations until next Sunday so that, as Yahweh directs His people to do in verse seven, we can “Sing aloud with gladness...proclaim and give praise...” to Yahweh because He has restored and saved us as His remnant people.

I. The Setting of the Text

✘ To truly appreciate this little treasure of a text, we need to spend just a moment understanding what was going on with Jeremiah and the people of Israel when Yahweh first directed Jeremiah to proclaim and record it.

✘ The year is 587 BC, one of the darkest times in all of Israel's history. You see, the majority of Jeremiah's prophesies are proclamations of God's law and judgement against the people. He wasn't called “The Weeping Prophet” for no reason. God directed Jeremiah to proclaim God's harsh reality against these people because of their rebellion; their worship of false gods; and their sinful disregard for God's Word of truth.

→ Things were so bad that the Tribes of Israel had become divided against each other. The northern 10 tribes were no longer worshipping Yahweh at the Temple in Jerusalem ... if they were worshipping Yahweh at all. And all 12 of the tribes were either under the influence or in utter fear of the pagan nations around them.

→ Jeremiah told the people over and over that God's judgement against their sin was going to come at them from the north if they didn't amend their ways, which it did, in the form of the Assyrian army 150 years earlier when they overtook the northern tribes and now in 587 BC

when King Nebuchadnezzar from Babylon came and destroyed Jerusalem's walls, burned the Temple and took the last of God's tribes away; into exile for 70 years.

- ✘ These captives are now wondering, "What have we done? Are we finished as God's people? Will Yahweh ever take us back?"
- ✘ I don't know about you, but when I compare their situation to ours today, I see many stark comparisons to the status of God's people right now, don't you?

→ The One Holy Christian Church – the new Kingdom of Israel under Jesus after He died, rose and ascended to prepare our place in heaven, is seriously divided again. There are more divisions within the Church today than can be counted. Many who claim to believe and worship Christ, don't even believe that the entire Bible is God's inerrant, perfect Word of truth from beginning to end anymore. Others actually give their approval to lifestyles and behaviors that are clearly against the Ten Commandments and other parts of Scripture.

→ And the beliefs, the principles, the powers and pressures of the scientific and secular government and world are pressuring and influencing; even trying to dictate what God's people in His Church can and can't say and teach and practice so that many believers are now cowering in fear in their homes and churches.

II. Yahweh's Call to His People

- ✘ That's why it is such a wonderful thing to find this lovely text here today in the book of Jeremiah. Hidden, you might say, in the midst of all of the law and judgement we have this beautiful bit of Gospel here that tells God's people of old, and you and me today, why the exile took place; why things are as bad for the Christian Church in America and around the world as today.

→ In fact, Yahweh starts us off in verse seven, with a very clear word of direction; telling His people the way through, and beyond, the difficulty and persecution that they/we find ourselves in right now.

- ✘ It's a reassurance that, though they may be in exile right now and away from God's Promised Land and His Holy Temple – even now in this time of discipline and judgement, they are still His beloved people.

→ Yahweh describes His people using four distinct terms of endearment. He starts out, "Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob...". Jacob – who later was renamed Israel, was the father; the unifying family patriarch of all the tribes of Israel. God is telling his descendants now, "You are still in My family!"

→ Yahweh continues, literally from the Hebrew, "...and cry intensely for the first of nations, make known, praise and say, O Yahweh, save your people." He is absolutely giving them a reason to cry out with intensity even in their time of distress because He reminds them, you are the "first of the nations" to be "My people". God is distinguishing these people over against all other "nations"; telling them that they are the "first"; the down payment, so to speak, of all of the rest of the nations – that is the Gentiles – you and me now in the New Testament era, who have been and will be grafted by grace into God's family.

→ And then the LORD concludes with a clarifying and comforting name, calling them "the remnant of Israel." Even though they are right now in the grasp of their captors, to call them "the remnant" is to already refer to them as those who have gone through their judgment and come out of it alive and saved and restored to be the nation of Israel once again. This is God's way of giving them the assurance of hope; the confidence of His victory and salvation.

- ⊗ All of this is Yahweh telling His people in love to turn away from their sin and despair in repentance, and to call upon Him and Him alone for salvation. He's letting them know what He expects them and even us today to do here in the exile and turmoil of our sinful ways.
 - ➔ Remember who you are and whose you are; sing with gladness, shout out your praise to the one and only God, and boldly call on Him in faith to save you and bring you back into His family!

III. Yahweh's Promise of Restoration

- ⊗ Then in verse eight, when we are tempted to fall into despair and think "all is lost," Yahweh promises us the exact opposite. He assures us that our call for salvation will be heard; will be acted upon in mighty and miraculous ways.
 - ➔ He says, "Behold I am bringing them (i.e. His remnant people) from the land of the north." The same place from which the judgement came and to which His judging enemies took His people, God is going into that hostile territory Himself to get them.
 - ➔ It doesn't matter how scattered; how divided; how far away from Him they have been taken or have wandered, He continues and says, "I will gather them from the far reaches of the earth."
- ⊗ In fact, Yahweh goes on to describe them as quite the motley, unassuming group of people. He says, "...among/in them are the blind, the lame, the pregnant and the ones in labor all together."
 - ➔ Just think about that description. These people can't walk on their own; they can't see where they're going, they are burdened down with unborn children and according to the Old Testament Law, because they are in labor, they are ceremonially unclean. These are the "leftovers" – not the prime parts of society.
 - ➔ So here's the point: no matter how weak, how burdened, how beat up we may be in life, it's not up to us or about us because it is always about the One who saves, leads, strengthens and loves us for who we are! Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."
- ⊗ In spite of our past sins, and even our continued sin, God chooses His people as they are and He leads them then ... leads us now to be the core of His people for the future. And through it all, He is the one who does all of the work.
 - ➔ He finishes out verse eight with this assurance, "...they will come back a great "kahal" (קהל) in the Hebrew. A "kahal" is not a political or secular group, but an active worshiping community; a congregation of God's changed and rejuvenated people!
- ⊗ God continues showing us His treasure in verse nine, describing His remnant people in this way: "With weeping they will return and with supplications for mercy I will lead them back." Are these tears of joy; of being cleansed; of relief, or of repentance? Yes, to all of those and still our merciful God is the one leading; the one doing all of this restorative work within and for us.
 - ➔ Oh, dear people, listen to how the joy and the reason for praise just keeps building. God promises, "I will make them walk to streams of water and by a sure way so that they will not stumble."
- ⊗ You and I today, we know Who and What way this is don't we? In Psalm 23 we are told that "Yahweh is my shepherd... (who) leads me beside still waters" (vv. 1-2). And in John 14:6, the Good Shepherd, Jesus declared, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."
 - ➔ When He is leading, gathering and bringing us back to Himself and His family through the cleansing and saving water of Holy Baptism, then friends, as long as we do not push our Savior

Jesus away in unbelief, there is no way we can stumble and not enter into heaven before the Father's throne of grace.

- ✘ That's the final work of assurance at the end of verse nine, and it's huge! Yahweh, says, "Because I am Father of Israel and Ephraim, He is My first born."

Conclusion

- ✘ This is the ultimate reason for us to cherish and display this treasure the LORD has uncovered for us today in His Word. God is and always has been "Father" to His people, whether they are of the tribe of Ephraim or Judah – at the time of Jeremiah and for us today.

➔ So no matter the trouble, the disease, the disability, the pain or the grief that we face, our God, in Jesus His Son, saves us, restores us and embraces us by His gracious work – making us to be a nation and a people like no other in the world!

➔ Sing it aloud then with gladness dear Christians. Proclaim it in all that you say and think and do, that you are a part of God's Rejoicing Restored Remnant forever! Amen.