

“Christmas Came”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Second Sunday of Christmas, January 3, 2015
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Texts: Jeremiah 31: 7-14 John 1: 1-18

Jeremiah 31:7-14

⁷For 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.” ⁸See, 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. ⁹With 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 in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

¹⁰Hear 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 a flock.” ¹¹For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. ¹²They 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. ¹³Then 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. ¹⁴I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him

was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

*⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.**

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.")¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,* who is close to the Father's heart,* who has made him known.*

A while back one December

Disciples of Christ minister Becky Brown McNeil was in a hardware store.
Just inside the front of the hardware store
a young man was high up on a ladder.

One of his co-workers called up to him, "What 'cha doing?"

"Taking these Christmas decorations down," he replied.

"Why?" asked the worker whose feet were planted on solid ground.

"The boss told me to.

He said we're almost done with Christmas."

As Becky listened to this conversation her mind reeled. *Done with Christmas?*

Christmas had not even begun, she thought.

It's the middle of December! We're in Advent!

Christmas doesn't start after Halloween

and end when the presents are opened.
Christmas doesn't end when the sales are over
and the decorations removed from aisle 3.

Christmas begins when we celebrate the birth of Christ on the 25th
and then continues for 12 days until the celebration of Epiphany on January 6th.
And even then, even after the last garlands are packed and stored away,
even after the last thank you note is mailed,
even after the fruit cake has been taken care of,
Christmas lives on.

Thanks be to God, Christmas came, and Christmas lives on.

There is no limit to the grace and goodness of God.

Christ was born of Mary for all the world.

Do you know someone who needs to hear this Word of hope?
Do you give thanks for the blessed souls who share this Good News with you?

We who have heard the Good News and listened intently to the Word, the Logos of God,
know and believe that Jesus Christ is with us.

May our hearts and minds resonate with the message from John:

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth;

we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Creator." -- John 1:14

The Word. Us.

The Word dwelt among us!

We have beheld and we have been held.

The Word. Us.

God in Christ is alive among us.

Christ came, and Christ is alive forever more.

We have seen His glory and He has seen our hearts.

Regardless of whether you perceive yourself to be in God's inner sanctum

or in exile, cast out, cast off, distant and removed, set aside or set apart,

God is with you.

God is present, even when you are distant or in exile.

A number of years ago in a Siberian prison

during the iron rule of Stalin in the Soviet Union, Christmas came.

The ground was covered with packed snow and temperatures dropped to a record low,
and still Christmas came.

Prisoners stood at barred windows,

staring outside as people from the nearby village walked past the prison

on their way to the little church on the hill,

on their way to worship because Christmas had come.

Many people were singing carols as they walked to church,

and an hour or so later they left to go home, carols still echoing across the land,

for Christmas had come.

A deep sadness settled upon the prisoners like a thick cloud.

They stood at the windows feeling alone and deserted and forgotten.

Then they saw the pastor leave the church and walk to the prison, enter the yard,

and begin to set up an altar in the dining hall.
“At last,” some of the prisoners shouted, “*Christ has come to us!*”
“Oh, no, my friends,” said the pastor, “*Christ is here all the time.*
He only goes to church on special occasions.”

Emmanuel. God with us.
God has come on earth to bring us the Good News in Jesus.
Christmas came. Christ is alive forever more.
Christ is here all the time.
God is present in the New Year, in new opportunities,
 in the new creation being formed in you.
You need only believe that something good is happening through the Christ in you,
 and so it shall be.

Consider, if you will, a true tale from our spiritual ancestors.

The book of Jeremiah is one of the longest books in the Bible,
 surpassed in number of pages only by the Psalms.
Jeremiah tells the story of how God and God’s people
 responded to a crisis of doubt and fear with trust and faith,
 and to a crisis of exile with community.
A significant portion of Jeremiah explores what happened
 when the Temple in Jerusalem – the dwelling place of the Lord of Israel –
 was destroyed in 587bce.

The people of God were cast out and the remaining remnant
 lived for years in exile in Babylon.

The Israelites were separated from their home and their God
 by a barren desert and their own broken hearts.
“*How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*”

Yahweh was associated with the Ark of the Covenant, with the Temple,
 and especially with the land that was promised to Abraham and Sarah
 and their descendents – the whole people of God.
The very idea of God overcoming an involuntary exile
 was as foreign as the new home in Babylon.

There we find the prophet Jeremiah ministering to his neighbors.
He was no different from anyone else; he bore the same scars and wounds,
 sought the same joy and release.
Together they’d been traumatized and torn asunder.
Surely the Messiah, the Christ Child, would never come to a people
 so far away, so broken, so fragmented by the tragedies of life and loss.
Just when we think we have got everything figured out, God’s love surprises us.
Even though he and his neighbors were far from their homes and homeland,
 the land of their ancestors and their God,
 the Lord remembered them all.

God spoke through Jeremiah words of comfort and hope.
 For thus says the Lord:

Are you carrying burdens you did not create?

Are you bearing burdens you do not wish to carry any longer?

Are you seeking, looking, hoping to find a shelf upon which to lay them down?

Do you desire a home for some rest, a friend who listens,
and a shoulder for some welcome relief?

If you are like me, we may find this hard to think about,
difficult to pray about,
and even tougher to share aloud.

And yet the reality is that everyone here has scars and wounds and healing memories
from experiences of involuntary upheaval and displacement.

We think we are so unique in our pain
yet we have so much in common, together, a great company.

The connecting points of our commonality
is where healing begins and God's grace takes root.

Come to the Lord's Table.

Lay down your burdens and refill your soul to overflowing.

Sit in silence and in prayer with neighbors who are just like you,
a great company of God's own.

Open your soul to be a channel for God's grace to work a miracle in another life.
Ponder in your heart the blessed souls who offered comfort and hope to you.

Where and when did you experience the grace of God?
Like Jeremiah, is God inviting you
to say a word or two to someone in your midst?

No one says you have to be great; all you have to be is yourself.
Doing so and being so is great in and of itself.

To be great, as Martin Luther King, Jr., once said,
"all you need is a soul generated by love."

Resolve to love.

Resolve to love and serve those whom Jeremiah called "a great company."

Resolve to be the love of God incarnate,
to be a living reminder that Christmas came and lives on in each of us.

A fellow clergy said that she made the following New Year's resolution:

*"I resolve that before I step out of the sanctuary to blow my nose
I will turn off my microphone."*

On this first Sunday of the New Year,
resolve to give thanks to God that Christmas came,
and remember always the greatest gift we got
was the blessed opportunity to be our true selves,
new and beautiful creations in Christ.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!