

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 147:12-20

Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1:(1-9) 10-18

New Year's is one of the times in our lives when we may be looking with hope for the future; that the new year might be a good year of us. Whenever something new comes along, we hope it means a better future. When a new governor or a new President is sworn in, we hope that the new leader may bring something good for us. We may pursue a new job or a new career, go to a new school, move to a new community, hoping for something better. God is always doing something new for us, and the question is, do we see it and are we willing to join in?

The prophet Jeremiah declared a new thing that God was doing. Most of his book is comprised of oracles against Judah and Jerusalem. He criticizes Judah for its worship of gods other than the Lord, with all the attendant evils in cult and daily life. Jeremiah warned the people that they must return to God. God will judge. Judah is judged. They are conquered by the Babylonians; the Babylonians destroyed much of their beloved city of Jerusalem, and, even worse, the temple. Many of the people were deported to Babylon, to live as strangers in a strange land. This is God's punishment.

And yet, in the mist of Jeremiah's words of doom and gloom, in chapters thirty through thirty-three, we find "The Book of Comfort," a more hopeful part of Jeremiah. Our Old Testament passage this morning is from this Book of Comfort. Jeremiah declares that God will end the oppression and a new Davidic king will again rule Israel. Israel will be healed and her oppressors will be despoiled. In our passage for this morning there will be a homecoming. God will assemble those Jews who had been dispersed. Jeremiah declares God's intention to restore the people after the exile. The exile will not be the end of the Jewish community or of Jewishness. Jeremiah voices

God's intention of newness. As the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote, "The poem is a collage of Israel's best stock phrases for the newness from God."

Many feel that the church is in a time of exile. You have heard me share with you about the demise of the mainline churches in terms of members ever since 1965, and the demise of the evangelical churches that began a few decades later. Overall church membership is declining year after year. Like many other denominations, our national staff is now only a percentage of what it was some decades ago. Because of dwindling money, the Presbyterian Church may begin calling missionaries back because we can no longer afford to pay them. Most churches are struggling financially. Many of the smaller churches are closing or can no longer afford their own pastor. Some churches have sold their property and are looking at new ways of being the church. Many are declaring gloom and doom because the church no longer is as influential in American society as it was in the 50s and 60s.

These words of hope to Israel who was in exile are also words of hope for the church who today seems to be in exile. In this month's newsletter I wrote about Phyllis Tickle, who claims that every 500 years the Christian church has gone through a revolution. The last great revolution was in 1517, the Protestant Reformation. It has been 500 years now, and she believes the church is going through another revolution. Maybe she is on to something. Maybe being the church in the future is going to be different than what it has meant in the past? Maybe God is doing something new. We should not complain about the decline in the church. Rather, we should discern what God is doing; to look at what it means to be the church in the twenty-first century. God does provide hope for the future.

One of the new things I have been hearing about the church today is that people want to make a difference in people's lives. If they participate in a church, they want the church to make a difference in other people's lives. You may have heard that the Presbyterian Church has set a goal for starting 1,001 new worshiping communities across our nation. A recent press release from the Presbyterian Church states that most of these worshiping communities tend to begin with a mission emphasis rather than a worship emphasis. The idea is to "show the gospel" before "telling about it." In this way they are reaching people who were previously unengaged with church. These people are attracted more by opportunities to make a difference in the world. They want to do service work, build relationships, and receive grace. And worship comes as a natural response to that grace. They want to feed the hungry at Matt Talbot, or shelter the homeless at the City mission, or teach English to our immigrants and refugees. They are not interested in churches that are focusing their energy on institutional survival, who think that the church must take care of itself first. They do not want to participate in a country club, but in an organization that is making a difference in people's lives.

Jeremiah declares that God "has redeemed." Notice that the scope of God's newness is utterly comprehensive. We find in this Book of Comfort references to well-watered land, the best crops, and the best animals, and no more drought. Israel is going to be a well-watered, productive land. The goodness of the Lord includes grain, wine, and oil.

Also note that those returning include the vulnerable, the blind, lame, and pregnant. The community returning is constituted by the disabled. Redemption refers to all of God's people enjoying a good life. God's redemption makes a difference in

people's lives. Everyone is to enjoy God's goodness, not just the 1%! The faithfulness of God makes possible a great homecoming of those valued by God but devalued by the nations.

Thus the church, you and I need to ask ourselves, "Who in our community is not yet singing with joy. Who has been left behind? According to Jeremiah's vision of Israel's redemption, the "least" among us are as important as the "greatest" in the economy of God's salvation. Maybe the new thing God is asking the church to do today is not keeping churches open, not hoping for new members because they will bring money and they can serve on committees and help with other activities to help lighten our load. Rather, we are being asked to be a part of God's redemption.

That does not mean that making a difference in people's lives is the only thing the church is to do. Worship comes as a response to God's grace. Our passage begins with God urging the people to, "sing aloud, raise shouts, proclaim, give praise, say!" These are all acts of worship. They are given here as imperatives—something that God is urging us to do but they can also be seen as declarations of celebration, celebrating what God has done for us. In response to the difference God has made in our lives, we respond by making a difference in other people's lives and by worshiping God.

Here we are at the beginning of a new year. Today we will be ordaining and installing new church leaders. We begin a new page in the mission of Heritage Church after celebrating 125 years last year. God calls us to make a difference in people's lives. May we understand and act on new things God is doing.

Glory to God in the highest
and peace to God's people on earth! Amen.