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First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange TX
5 January 2019—Second Sunday of Christmas
Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:1-18

Witness to Light

The ball dropped in Times Square five days ago, and we—as a nation—moved from Christmas to New Year's: resolutions, gym memberships, best and worst lists, top 100 countdowns, white sales. Cultural Christmas is over and even the stores have moved on to...

Valentine's Day. Seriously. In Walmart. Right next to the Christmas clearance section.

But in church, we work off a slightly different schedule—as you can tell from the décor—and this morning, we celebrate on last Sunday of Christmas. In fact, today is the twelfth and final day of Christmas. Tomorrow, we celebrate Epiphany—the arrival of the Magi—with our friends at St James Episcopal Church.

In keeping with this Christmas season, our gospel reading gives us one last Christmas story.

That's right—a Christmas story.

Okay, so we don't normally talk about the beginning of John's gospel as a Christmas story. In ivory tower language it's called a "hymn to the light," an "ode to the Word," an "alternative creation narrative," and even an "invitation to bear witness"—but at its heart, it's a Christmas story—THE CHRISTMAS STORY.

In his blog, preacher David Lose, calls this an "unsentimental" Christmas story.¹ "Unsentimental" because there it has no hint of the familiar nativity pageant. No angels, no shepherds, no pregnant teenagers, no Roman census, no over-crowded inns, no star, no wisemen, no gifts—nothing but Emmanuel, God with us.

The whole of the birth announcement is just nine words: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." But the invitation of John's gospel is to experience the difference those nine words make in our lives. This single phrase—John tells us—is not only the source of hope and joy that fills our lives, it also illuminates the entire world.

John's gospel was written near the end of the first century; the last of the gospels to take shape. The composition is—well—different. It explores the stories of Jesus using them to teach us about God and about ourselves.

It asks the timeless questions: What do we come to know in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? What does it mean to us that "the Word became flesh?"

Michael Jenkins was one of my mentors at Austin Seminary. I still remember the Advent Devotion he wrote for Christmas in 2005. He talked about THIS moment; the moment God became Emmanuel. He calls it the “wonderful exchange.” That singular moment when our Creator took on human being and became part of creation.

Michael writes that the “infinite and eternal,” God willingly “subjected himself to the ravages of time, and the temptations that surround us. God did these things,” he assures us so that “sinful humanity, might be redeemed... This strain runs like a chorus through the teachings of the early Church: Jesus Christ is himself the reconciliation... As Irenaeus said: God became like us so that we might become like God.”

Reflecting on this promise, Michael lifts up an ancient prayer: “Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home.”²

The incarnation is the promise of homecoming—and that is the promise we hear in Jeremiah this morning.

Turns out, Jeremiah was not exactly a popular prophet. (Of course, popular prophet might be an oxymoron like jumbo-shrimp, weirdly-normal, or common-sense).

After the fall of the Assyrian empire, Israel was in resurgence. The people were filled with religious nationalism and it was a time of general prosperity. Yet, the prophet Jeremiah spent all of those “good times” calling Israel to repentance. For forty years, his message was the same: Repent and return to God. Then Babylonian armies swept the land clean taking its leaders and people into exile.

This morning, Janie read from Jeremiah’s “Book of Consolations” written for this people in exile. Every day, they woke to the crushing sense of God’s absence. And into that defeat, Jeremiah spoke God’s promised restoration and God’s faithful presence with the people of Israel.

Jeremiah tells them: the way home will be straight, with abundant water, and the returning throng shall include not only the good and acceptable, but those on the margins of religious practice—the blind and the lame. The restoration is not only for the young and strong, but also the aged; not only for the men, but also the women.

All, Jeremiah proclaims, will find joy. All will find restoration. All will be restored. All will come home filled with strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

Something in Jeremiah’s word resonates in me. When I look carefully at the world around me and at my own life, I realize that so very often we live in exile—isolated from our neighbors, from one from another, and from God.

Many of us live apart from our families, worried about aging parents or concerned for our children—even our adult children. We sit side by side in our pews, each of us bearing our own hurts and heartaches, hesitant to share.

We are quietly broken by the state of our marriages or the pain of divorce or the death of a spouse. We are alienated by extended unemployment or under-employment, or even the inexplicable loss that comes at retirement. We are segregated through overwork, stretched to the limit and desperately in need of balance between work and play, others and self, self-less giving and self-care.

We are silenced by the cares of aging, the diminishment of vitality, the specter of memory loss, and the litany of changes in our daily lives—about which we are determined. Not. To. Whine.

We know the isolation of struggle with illness, addiction, loss, imprisonment.

We grieve—mostly by ourselves—the loss of children, parents, family members, neighbors, friends.

Our spirits are assaulted by images of violence, prejudice, bigotry, poverty, hunger, natural disaster, open warfare, and injustice. So much so that we often feel powerless and afraid and alone.

We are in exile...

Yet, it is EXACTLY in this exile that God meets us. John tells us the good news: The LIGHT shines in the darkness and the darkness did not, has not, will not ever overcome it.

The prologue of John's gospel is one of my favorite pieces of scripture. I confess that in reading it, I often skip to get to that "good news:"

- "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."
- "The Word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth."
- "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."

But today, in this Christmas reading, I was drawn again and again to this: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."

That is the gift of John's Christmas story. Its gaze includes not only the birth of Jesus, but our rebirth as sons and daughters to God. In the incarnation, we become brothers and sisters to Christ, brothers and sisters to each other...

David Lose asks, "Did you catch that? Jesus came that we might become children of God... not dominated by the circumstances in which we find ourselves, not defined by our limitations or hurts... [but] as those... who know ourselves to be God's own beloved children."³

I would ask us to imagine: how do we live as beloved children of God in a world filled with beloved children of God and with darkness?

Janet Hunt, a pastor in Illinois, tells a story about Ruth, a church member living with dementia. Janet takes home communion to Ruth each month. Conversation was difficult, but Janet learned that Ruth was known as a wonderful singer. On her December visit, Janet invited Ruth to sing Christmas carols.

They began with "Away in a Manger." Ruth sang this beautiful song she knew by heart with "a voice mostly untouched by her 99 years." It was a moment all about the joy of God's loving presence with us.

After a few more carols, Ruth said, “You know, if I could have one more job, I would like to preach.” Janet asked, “What would you preach?” Ruth replied, “God loves you... that’s about it.”⁴

“God loves you.” Friends THIS is the Christmas story. It is our consolation and it is our promise of restoration. It is the miracle of God’s presence with us: God’s light shining into the darkness of our exile inviting us to come home.

We can share this good news as simply as Ruth would preach it—holding in our hearts the knowledge that, “God love us” and then sharing a reflection of that love with the world. We can say in word and in deed, “God loves you; you are not alone.” For in Jesus Christ we begin to know ourselves to be beloved, to be welcomed, transformed, and brought near to God’s own heart.

We can bear witness to the light, even as we join that ancient prayer:
“Father of all, we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off
you met us in your Son and brought us home.”

On this Twelfth day—Merry Christmas, Happy New Year. Amen.

¹ Lose, David. “An Unsentimental Christmas Sermon.” *Dear Working Preacher*. www.workingpreacher.org. 30 Dec 2013.

² Jinkins, Michael. *In this Season: 2005 Advent Reflections from the Austin Seminary Community*. (Austin, TX: Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2005). 32.

³ Lose.

⁴ Hunt, Janet. “A Christmas Message.” *Dancing with the Word*. <http://words.dancingwiththeword.com>. 24 Dec 2012.