

2000 YEARS OF PROMISES

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Sunday, January 3, 2010 – Second Sunday after Christmas

Rev. James Campbell

I used to love Christmas, but somewhere along the way the good tidings of great joy got lost for me. And rather unwittingly at first, I began to embrace cynicism. I started to tell people that I didn't like Christmas. That seemed to shock some people, especially coming from a pastor. And I confess that I sometimes get a little bit of Grinch-like glee from their response.

The week before Christmas, I met an old friend for lunch. We were having a perfectly wonderful time when I reminded him that we had made plans to see a movie on Christmas Day. When I asked him if he was still up for it, he seemed strangely non-committal. After a moment he said: "Well OK, but only if you leave your cynicism at home. I don't want you ruining my Christmas." I smiled and assured him that I wouldn't, but I wasn't so sure I could keep that promise. You see, my negative feelings about Christmas are strong and deep. And that does disturb me on some level. Sometimes I wonder if I am just reacting to the rampant consumerism and cheap sentimentality of what Christmas has become. If that's the case, then I stand by my disdain. But

sometimes I think there might be more to it than that. Is my cynicism a spiritual issue and does it need my attention?

For the 4 weeks of Advent, in liturgy and music and words we expressed the longing of our hearts for a world at peace. We actively and intentionally waited for the Messiah – a Savior – to be born to us. And all of that longing and hope and expectation culminated in a Christmas Eve service bursting with wonder and joy and beauty. This church was full of people and the promises of Christmas seemed so real it was as if I could reach out and touch them. My cynicism began to melt. Peace on earth, good will to all.

I woke up on Christmas Day still feeling the afterglow of hopefulness. And then I turned on the television. That was a big mistake. I was greeted, as we all were, by the very un-Christmas like message of terror on earth and good will toward none. The cable newscasters breathlessly announced that a plot to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit had been narrowly avoided. Apparently Christmas Day was purposefully chosen for this act of violence. Upon hearing this news, my Christmas spirit seemed to evaporate. The service the night before filled with carols of love and hope and peace seemed a cruel tease. Pondering this latest attempted terror attack, I

allowed myself to actively wonder, really wonder, what difference Christ's coming into our world has really made? Can any of you tell me? We have had 2000 years of promises, and while there have been astonishing leaps forward and progress in many areas, even so, the innocent are still slaughtered and the refugees still flee to other countries and the poor still give birth in places better suited for animals. I want so much for the promise of the angels to be true. But it's as if the world is deaf to the angels' song. It's safer to be cynical. You're far less apt to be disappointed.

Jeremiah is called the "weeping prophet" because it was his unpleasant task to warn the people of the judgment of God upon their failure to live as God intends. It is not an easy book to read. Most of the prophets are difficult to read. But in the middle of the book of Jeremiah, there is an oasis in the desert. For about three chapters, the judgments of God cease and instead the people are offered consolation. Theologians refer to these three chapters as Jeremiah's Little Book of Consolation. In them, the prophet waxes eloquent about a beautiful future in which all is made right. Some scholars believe that these chapters were written just as the terrorist of Jeremiah's day were at the gate of the city. In 587 BC, the Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, attacked Jerusalem. Thousands of people were murdered and many of the

survivors were forced into exile in Babylon; prisoners of war. Can you imagine hearing words of promise while at the same time hearing the voices of your enemies just on the other side of the wall. Did they hear Jeremiah's words as good news or as deluded news?

Jerusalem was on "red alert" when the prophet said: *"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. 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 in which they shall not stumble... 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. 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."*

With the enemy at the door, Jeremiah proclaimed that there was reason for hope. With the enemy at the door, Jeremiah proclaimed that all God's

promises are true. With the enemy at the door, Jeremiah announced a party with singing and dancing.

It must have seemed like foolishness to some of the people who heard it. And Christmas, the real promises of Christmas, can seem like so much foolishness to us who long to believe. Year after year, we hear the same promises from Scripture. And year after year, we wake up the day after to a world that seems forever the same.

On the Tuesday before Christmas, I attended the funeral of a dear woman I had known for years. Pat had been a missionary in the Congo in the 60s and 70s, and for the rest of her life she carried a deep love for the African people. Pat was forever reminding us that we had so much to learn from them. She was a woman of great moral character and deep charity. When I heard that she died, I knew I had to go pay my respects, even in the midst of all the craziness of the week of Christmas.

And so we gathered in a neighborhood church. The Advent Wreath was lit, that sign of promise in the midst of darkness. And we sang lot of hymns and people said a lot of wonderful things. But going to the funeral of such a fine

person didn't do much to help me break free of my cynicism... until that is, we sang the last hymn of the day. At first I sang rather tepidly, not paying much attention. But by the time we got to the fourth verse and repeated the refrain for the fourth time, the promise of the prophets and sages started to crack my hardened shell. "We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion; we're marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God." And quite suddenly I remembered what I know, but forget. We have not arrived. But we are marching, moving, advancing.

Most of you know that song. We like it around here. It's a rousing tune. Some might even say there is dance in it. And Jeremiah promised that one day, the young women would rejoice in the dance. Singing the song lifted my spirits and actually even made me smile. And Jeremiah promised that one day, the young men and older ones would be merry. As we sang, my sadness at Pat's death was turned toward something that looked like gratitude; gratitude for her life. And Jeremiah promised that one day, God would exchange our sorrow for gladness.

My problem is remembering that we do not yet live in a Christmas world, and yet, we are called to be people of the Christmas promise. It's so easy for me to

forget the second part. Maybe you do too. And that, dear friends, is one of the reasons it's so important for us to gather here – to collectively remember the promises; to rejoice together in every step toward goodness and charity and justice. It's so important for us to come here, in this city marked as a target for terrorists, to sing and dance and proclaim with words and our lives that God's promises of peace and healing are true. It is so important for us to model, here, a counter-cultural community in which the blind and lame, those with child and the weeping find shelter and joy.

We don't yet live in Zion, but that is where we are going. And that is how we are called to live. And if we can remember that; if we are willing to put flesh and blood on God's promises, then we help to prove St. John's audacious and wonderful claim that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Thanks be to God. Amen.