

GOD WHO SCATTERS WILL GATHER

Ephesians 1:3-14
Jeremiah 31:7-14

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TEXT: Jeremiah 31:10 “Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it to the coastlands far away; say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd of a flock.’”

PURPOSE: To encourage trust in God, who does what God does, whether to scatter or to gather God’s people, as an expression of God’s everlasting love and faithfulness.

It is the tenth day of Christmas. The ten lords a-leaping are welcome at our house if they undecorate the tree and haul it over to White Farm in a one horse open sleigh. Tomorrow, the eleven pipers can bring their own vacuum cleaner and get rid of all the stray pine needles left over once the tree is out of the house. Ours is already sufficiently clogged from vacuuming during the days that the tree has graced our living room. So it goes with the tail end of the Christmas season. I don’t know about you, but I always feel a little scattered as the holidays end and the new year begins. The holiday hustle is behind me, but what is before me? I would like to get back to normal eating, but cookies continue to tempt from their tins on the hutch. If there’s enough snow, I’m happy if I have time to ski, but if there isn’t enough snow or enough time, I’m not quite sure what to do with myself.

As we begin this new year and this new decade, my personal scattering pales in comparison to the scattering our world is experiencing. Here’s just one sobering statistic: there are 42 million refugees in the world today. Twenty six million of these people are displaced within their own countries, with Iraq and Afghanistan having the largest numbers of people uprooted in their own countries. The other sixteen million are living in camps in other countries, eighty percent of which are in developing countries which can barely afford to care for their own citizens. That’s a lot of scattering. The current group of Bhutanese refugees coming here to Concord represent a small percentage of the over one hundred thousand Bhutanese who have been living in camps in Nepal for almost two decades, the victims of religious and economic persecution.¹

You know there is much more to say about the scattering that distresses our world, but I want to shift the focus and spend some time exploring the scattering that church life in the United States is experiencing. The world of American religion today is not the world of fifty years ago. Back then, congregations were cohesive; now, congregations are loose associations of people with declining degrees of loyalty to the

¹www.unhcr.org (United Nations High Commission on refugees web site)

institution. Back then, congregations assumed a predictable transition from one generation to the next; now, churches cannot count on their children to become adult leaders, and even marriage and having children doesn't bring young adults back to church. Back then, American churches enjoyed reasonable financial stability, and American denominational agencies had plenty of money for programs and missions. Now, churches are facing widespread financial insecurity, and the regional, national, and ecumenical settings of the church are barely able to exist. The net result is that churches are more scattered than we are gathered. More congregants are loosely associated than they are firmly committed. More churchgoers are customers, who expect to get something out of coming to church, than they are investors, who put something into the ministry not for their own sake, but for the sake of the gospel. More people hold an individualistic view of what's involved in being faithful than hold a view that faithfulness is shaped, sustained, and expressed in community. All these trends are recent arrivals, and few churches have discovered effective strategies for responding to them. Which puts churches in the clutches of chronic decline and anxiety.

I'm starting our New Year on a downer in response to the text from the prophet Jeremiah which we heard this morning. It is a remarkably jubilant text, but its jubilation is informed by the doom that is the dominant theme of Jeremiah's message. Jeremiah foresaw the terrible consequences, which were a crime even to name, of God's people trusting sources of security and prosperity which were not God. Destruction of the nation, and the end of the royal line, was inevitable. Destruction of the temple and the whole religious system was inevitable. Scattering of the people, exile to a far off country, was inevitable. It was a terrible message God gave to Jeremiah, and announcing that message it cost him dearly.

But Jeremiah also saw God restoring God's people after they were devastated. "He who scattered Israel will gather him," Jeremiah announced, "and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." (Jeremiah 31:10) This is a word of great confidence, of faith overcoming anxiety, of trusting God to be God, and not just to be God doing what we think God should be doing.

More: Jeremiah's vision speaks not so much of spiritual blessings as of material ones. The passage we heard from the Letter to the Ephesians is all about spiritual blessings: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 1:3) Here's a few items on that spiritual blessings list: God destined us for adoption as

God's children, as John proclaimed in today's gospel passage. Through Jesus Christ we have forgiveness of our sins. God has made known to us the mystery of God's will to gather up all things in Christ. There's that 'gathering' again, but here understood in a cosmic sense. Finally, we have received an inheritance which enables us to live for the purpose of praising the glory of God. These are magnificent blessings, but I have to admit— they are a bit hard to grasp. What does it mean that we are God's adopted children? How do we experience the forgiveness that is ours in Christ? And what would my life look like if it was lived for the purpose of praising God? That sounds like a job better left to the angels.

But Jeremiah— Jeremiah's list of blessings are remarkably material, remarkably easy to grasp. For him, the "goodness of the Lord" includes grain, wine, and oil as well as fruitful flocks and herds of animals. It involves the return of all who had been scattered, with special mention of those for whom the journey would be most difficult: people who are blind, who are physically disabled, women who are pregnant, even women in active labor. The list of blessings climax with a description of the first after-Christmas gift exchange: mourning exchanged for joy, gladness exchanged for sorrow. The priests get special mention— they get their "fill of fatness"—I'll take that as a promise of an unending supply of fruitcake, blessed with no need to go on a New Year's diet. Add up all these blessings, and, the Lord says: "My people shall be satisfied with my bounty. Their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again."

I don't mean to make light of the spiritual blessings acclaimed in the letter to the Ephesians, but the stuff in Jeremiah's vision feels a whole lot more accessible. It also speaks more directly to the scattering we experience as American church folk in the twenty-first century. The preacher can urge our appreciation of spiritual blessings Sunday after Sunday, but the truth is, until we have some modern version of grain, wine and oil—a satisfying bounty providing real vitality for our languishing institutions—our church life will not feel all that much like a watered garden.

But here is the absolute certainty which is the source of this bounty: it arises from trusting God. God is the one who gathers, who saves, who restores, who redeems God's own people, as Jeremiah puts it, "from a hand too strong for us." If we put our trust in the material blessings themselves, we are doing exactly what provoked God to scatter Israel in the first place: we are making a god of that which is not a god. It goes back to that sign I saw over twenty years ago posted outside a church in North Carolina: "Your god is whatever you think you can't do without." If a church thinks it can't survive unless it has more money, or more young families, or more parking

spaces, or more people willing to serve on boards, then that church is turning those things into gods, which is the most dangerous thing a church could do. The only thing a church of Jesus Christ can't survive without is radical trust in God.

Here is the most amazing thing about what Jeremiah envisioned for scattered Israel: God's gathering was God's gracious work. There is nothing in Jeremiah's prophecies of renewal which suggest that God won't renew Israel unless Israel straightens itself out. God chooses to restore Israel's fortunes because God loves Israel with an everlasting love. God's work of scattering, at its root, was a work of love, and God's work of gathering will be, just the same, a work of love. This is the sovereign grace in which we find life. This is what John was talking about when he said of Jesus, "from his fullness we all have received, grace upon grace." (John 1:16)

So here's the good news from old Jeremiah, sounding across the centuries to the scattered churches of America in the twenty-first century: God who scattered us will gather us. Consider that the troubles which have plagued the church do not stem from external forces like society's secularization and a distressed economy, but come from the love of God, who knows us as we are unable to know ourselves, and sees that we have allowed ourselves to put our trust in that which is not God. But consider also that God has not given up on us, that God's love for us, and through us to the world, does not fail. Consider that God continues to have a plan which includes a restored church, a people who will be, as Jeremiah knew that Israel would be, "radiant over the goodness of the Lord," whose life will be "like a watered garden," (Jeremiah 31:12) a fruitful blessing in the world God still intends to save through a people of God's gracious choosing.

If we trust the promise of God gathering and restoring before we experience its fulfillment, how will that shape who we are, and how we order our life together, as the Church of Jesus Christ in these days? We will say, our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. We will say, praise God from whom all blessings flow. We will make such statements of faith, but then, we will abide by them. Our life together will be free from anxiety, because we rejoice in the blessed assurance that we continue to receive grace upon grace from the fullness which flows from Christ. The light which shines in the darkness will shine on us, and in us, and through us, and the darkness will not prevail. God who scatters will gather. God, and no other power, will restore. In that confidence, we receive the life that God wants for all creation.