

GOD WHO SCATTERS WILL GATHER

Jeremiah 31:7-14

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John 1:10-18

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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 keeps a flock.’”

PURPOSE: To renew our confidence that God loves us with an everlasting love, and to recognize both God’s scattering of us and God’s gathering of us as expressions of divine love.

I was among those my age who managed to stay up long enough to watch the Times Square ball drop at midnight on New Year’s Eve. What a wild party guy you have for a minister. Along with seeing a Dick Clark who looked like a wax museum representation of himself, I also saw those tens of thousands of Times Square party people, all looking about as happy as happy ever gets. I wouldn’t want to take a bit of that spirit away from any one of them. We all deserve at least one night a year of joyful memories and unbridled optimism.

But the unfortunate reality this year is that the year just past was difficult for many, and the year just dawning looks rather bleak. This past year, our state endured a devastating tornado and its worst ice storm in history. The economy hurt people in all kinds of ways. And many households are experiencing wrenching instability, because of illness, or grief, or disintegration of relationships.

In the wider world, we may be guardedly optimistic about the stabilizing of Iraq, but Afghanistan looms as an even more complicated conflict. We begin the year with a new outbreak of violence in the Gaza strip, and grave concern over chilling relations between India and Pakistan. Our own dear Zimbabwe is only one of many African countries facing food shortages, or despotic governments, or open conflict.

We live in a world with crises scattered all around, and many of our and our neighbors’ lives feel frightfully scattered. These kinds of scatterings can leave us feeling anxious and helpless. They can leave us wondering whether God is paying attention to the plight of planet earth.

In the book of the prophet Jeremiah, there is a remarkable prophetic word regarding scattering and gathering, specifically about who is doing the scattering and the gathering. In the passage we heard this morning, Jeremiah announces that, “He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps a flock.” (Jeremiah 31:10) Jeremiah was declaring something about God that God’s people had never imagined: *It was God* who was behind the utter destruction of Israel as a

nation and a religious community. And it is God who is able to recreate the community in a whole new way.

This is a powerful, transforming word, especially coming from Jeremiah, who has rightly earned the title, “the prophet of doom.” Jeremiah prophesied God’s terrible judgement against Israel on the eve of Babylon’s assault against the nation of Judah. Apparently, almost everyone but Jeremiah believed that God’s people had not turned away from trusting obedience to God. After all, they fulfilled their religious obligations at the temple, didn’t they? And almost everyone but Jeremiah believed that God would not let Babylon destroy Judah, but would save her with some last minute miracle. Jeremiah saw beyond what Israel wanted to believe about God to a dreadful truth: God was capable of allowing the destruction of God’s own people. Needless to say, Jeremiah never won the “prophet of the year” award. He never got his face on the cover of Time magazine. He wasn’t at all in demand as a visiting preacher at big religious rallies. But what Jeremiah prophesied about the destruction of Judah came true. In two assaults a decade apart, mighty Babylon swooped down on the tiny nation and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple that had been its crown for four centuries. Most of the nation’s leaders went off to exile in Babylon. The people who were left behind lived with more upheaval and insecurity than the people of Zimbabwe do today. It certainly appeared that God had scattered Israel.

This was a hard pill to swallow for this people who had, until this time, thought of God as their personal security guard. God, they thought, would never let them down. God, they thought, would always behave as they expected God to behave. God, they thought, would ignore their unfaithfulness and keep on taking care of them because God’s way in the world depended on the continuation of Israel as a nation, and on the continuation of the Jerusalem temple as the center of worship. But, with Jerusalem in ruins, it appeared that Jeremiah had been right, and all the popular prophets who had proclaimed “peace” when there was no peace had, just as Jeremiah had said, “dressed the wound of my people lightly.” (Jeremiah 6:14)

The amazing thing is that Jeremiah saw the goodness of God in this scattering. Jeremiah understood what may take a lifetime for many of us to learn: that God’s scattering is a function of God’s holy and utterly trustworthy love. It was not that God had given up on faithless Israel. It was that faithless Israel required extreme measures to get it to recognize the depth of its dependence on God. The God who called Jeremiah to ministry of proclaiming God’s judgement never abandoned Israel, never gave up on the children of Abraham and Sarah. “I have loved you with an

everlasting love,” God told the people through Jeremiah, “therefore I have continued by faithfulness to you.” (Jeremiah 31:3)

The first piece of good news in this strange story was that, if it was God who had scattered Israel, then God was sovereign even over the might of mighty Babylon. This was an amazing insight. In those days, if one country beat another country in war, it meant that the winning country’s gods were stronger than the gods of the losing country. After Babylon vanquished Israel, most Israelites thought that their God was no match for the gods of Babylon. But Jeremiah proclaimed a startling, unimagined possibility: Babylon was an instrument in the hands of the only true God, who remained faithful to Israel.

This is a piece of good news that we need in our lives. Way too often, when forces of misfortune assail us, we inwardly conclude that those forces are beyond God’s control. We begin to fear that God might not be able to keep them from harming us. The insidious disease, the growing stack of bills, the unstable economy—things like these look like attacks from forces over which God is not in charge. But Jeremiah’s belief that God was in charge of Israel’s “scattering” puts the lie to this. God is sovereign over mighty Babylon. God is sovereign over every oppressor, over every assailant, over every economy. And if you don’t like God being sovereign over the powers that we fear could do us in, consider the alternative. I’d rather that God was doing whatever scattering I’m experiencing than any other power on earth or in the heavens. I’d rather believe that God, even in the middle of a scattering, continues to love us with an everlasting love, than to wonder whether some evil force has established a beachhead where God once ruled.

The second piece of good news in all this is that what endures about God is God’s steadfast love. God may not behave the way we expect God to behave. But God will act according to God’s perfect wisdom and unflinching love. God’s actions may at time appear to be somewhat arbitrary, but this is what I have discovered: it is always possible to look at our circumstances, no matter how scattered they might seem, and to become aware that a wise and loving God is working through those circumstances for our greater good.

After years of Jeremiah’s ranting about how God was planning to scatter faithless Israel, his new message about God bringing people home and making their life like a watered garden must have come as a great surprise. But Jeremiah knew that God’s intentions were completely consistent, be they expressed in scattering or

in gathering, in uprooting or in planting, in handing over or in redeeming. The point was to convince Israel that they were dependent on God, and not the other way around, that God was dependent on Israel. After Babylon had devastated Israel and taken its leaders into exile, Jeremiah did not begin singing a new song, but only a new verse of the same song, the song of God's persistent love, which anguishes over the faithlessness of God's beloved people, but only and always looks for ways to revitalize God's covenant relationship with us.

God who scatters will gather. God will take care of us like a shepherd takes care of a flock. God will bring God's people home, the whole lot of us, even the blind and the lame, even women with child and women in labor—no one will be excluded, no one left behind—such is the sovereign power of our utterly faithful God. God will make the lives of those who feel like a wasteland into a watered garden. God will turn our mourning into joy, our sorrow into gladness, and everyone will feel like dancing!

This was a powerful promise for the defeated, scattered Israelites in the days of the exile, and it is a powerful promise for us in our days as well. It is powerful because it comes from God who is in charge both of scattering and gathering. It is powerful because it assures us that no power seeking our ruination can overcome the power of God's faithful love. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome come it. (John 1:5)

On a hill outside Jerusalem, in an era between the days of the exile and our day, God revealed the full extent of divine love. On that hill, God proved to be sovereign not just over scattering and gathering, but over death as well as life. When Jesus died, it appeared as if the best God had to offer had been defeated by the worst humans had to dish out. When Jesus died, it seemed as if the sword was stronger than the manger, as if the practice of forgiving love was no match for the cunning of powerful people. But we know that exactly the opposite is true. We know that the cross was central to God's plan right from the beginning, and also that the empty tomb and the risen Christ, not the cross, is the climax of the story. We know that God has done all that needs to be done to gather all people, however far we have been scattered, however far we might have strayed, into the circle of God's beloved community. We know, and so we rejoice, even if our lives and our world are still scattered. We rejoice, even if we still haven't come all the way home. We rejoice, because we believe that God never has and never will stop loving us, and we know that Christ is present with us as the guarantee of that love.