

2 Christmas – Year C – January 3, 2010
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12
Susan E. Wilmot

Our Godson lives with his family in Massachusetts, and we keep in touch by regular emails with updates and pictures. John is still too young to be involved in the prom, homecoming, and formal dance scene that are so much a part of the high school experience. However, he does have a much older brother and sister who have both been snapped looking like movie stars with a variety of dates at each dance through their high school years. It's fascinating to me – mostly because it's an American tradition and not something that I personally experienced growing up in England. Having said that, I'm not above living a little vicariously, so when I got the opportunity to be one of the chaperones for Blue Ridge High School homecoming I said yes. Per instructions, we arrived early to get our final assignments. The theme was Vegas, and just like its namesake, when the lights were up it all looked sort of sad and shabby. To me at least, the school gym looked and smelt like a school gym with a couple of sorry-looking posters, a few streamers, and some balloons hanging in embarrassed clusters. By the time the teens started to arrive, the disco lights were competing with the semi-darkness and the flash of cell phone panels. Soon bright-colored twirling dresses were added to the mix. There was a buzz of excitement in the air. It was, after all, homecoming, and royalty would be crowned and celebrated.

This morning we have another portion from the prophet Jeremiah's little Book of Consolation, which is basically some good news slotted into a much larger work announcing judgment and destruction. In fact, in today's reading Jeremiah is proclaiming God's promise of salvation and restoration before the Babylonian exile even occurs. His words are poetic, conjuring images of the psalms. Being led along straight paths beside brooks of water by the shepherd Lord sounds a lot like Psalm 23, for example. Psalm 68 talks about the Lord as the father of orphans. Yahweh is described by Jeremiah as both a father to the people, and a shepherd. These are familiar and comforting images for the people of Judah, and for many of us as well. They speak of the loving presence and care of a parent, and the protection of the shepherd. These thoughts are also echoed in the phrase, "their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again." The German root of the word garden describes it as an enclosed and protected space. The description of the garden being watered tells us of God's plan to tend His people, provide for their needs, and to help us grow. Growth and fruitfulness are implicit, as is the abundance of God's grace in this work of redemption.

As in most of the prophetic writings, God's care and concern for the least amongst us is also evident in this reading. There are strong themes of homecoming, reconciliation, and inclusion. Our Lord Jesus would also live out each of these as a visible reminder of God's desire for all to be reconciled to Him through Christ. God's gift of salvation is freely available with no exclusions. Although, that does not diminish our freedom of choice in any way. In the return from exile, those that are blind and lame will be gathered together into the new community, one where they are welcome and will worship the Lord their God. Children and pregnant women – the most vulnerable members of society -- are also included, promising new life and new hope. Freedom and a return to right relationship with God is not something we earn, or can achieve by our own efforts. This is God's gift of grace to God's people. It is a tangible demonstration of the power of God's reconciling work in the world, one that is repeated in our own lives. God saves us from our enemies, and from our selves. We don't have to be in recovery from alcohol or drug addiction to relate to the powerful stories of redemption and reconciliation that so many have experienced. I have heard many people tell how the twelve-step program has helped them, and countless others, to realize their own powerlessness in the face of their demons, both real and perceived. At the Angel Tree party, I talked with a grandmother who is currently caring for two of her grandchildren. She shared the story of her

own struggle with drugs, and how God granted her the gift of faith that has given her the courage and strength to stay drug free for over ten years. She felt that part of her own redemption is a second chance at life, and most importantly the opportunity to teach her grandchildren about the dangers of drugs. We each have a story or two to tell of God's grace at work in our lives and families. Think about it. Have you seen or experienced some form of homecoming, perhaps like the so-called prodigal son; or our own return to God, after a period of great darkness or despair in our lives. Redemption and reconciliation are patterns imprinted in the history of salvation, and the history of our own earthly journeys.

In the coming of Christ Jesus, God incarnate, or perhaps more precisely Jesus' first homecoming, and through our faith in Him, Christians celebrate the redemption of our lives from sin, and the promise of everlasting life. We have been given the gift of wholeness and healing, God's peace and joy in our hearts, and transformed lives that bear the fruit of our right relationship with God and one another. For the people of Judah, their redemption from the Babylonian exile is described in Jeremiah as a period of wholeness and peace, indicative of God's *shalom*. There is fruitfulness amongst the people and all creation: grain, wine, oil, young in the flock and herd, and much growth. Times of great peace and abundance also bring the opportunity for increased leisure. Jeremiah describes the people celebrating and praising God for their redemption in song and dance.

The word, 'redeem' or 'redeemer' is used only three times by the prophet Jeremiah, and at each instance it the strong work of the Lord that achieves redemption for the people. In Jeremiah chapter 50:34 that redemption is a specific judgment against Babylon, who is the major threat to the people of Jeremiah's time. It is apparent from Jeremiah's prophecy that God's defeat of the historical Babylon is a precursor for Judah's fruitful restoration in the Lord. Being back in right relationship with God gives the people cause to dance and be merry. We might equally apply God's defeat through Christ of the metaphorical Babylon, otherwise known as sin, as a prerequisite for the final restoration of right order on earth, giving us ample reason to praise God, dance and be filled with joy.

Jesus our Lord and Savior is here. Yet so are the winter blues, and the post-Christmas slump in our emotional, financial and spiritual state. Is it hard now to live in ways that reflect our gratitude and praise to God for all God's goodness, grace and love? Is our Christmas spirit turning into stress as we face another huge winter heating bill on top of our Christmas bills? Does January feel like our own kind of exile, when everything seems uncertain and out of control and we wonder where God is in all this? There are times for all of us when our vision becomes very short sighted, and we feel like we are lost in the storms of life. Still, Jeremiah makes it clear that the Lord wants to be known, and is constantly at work rebuilding and renewing, redeeming and reconciling all of creation to God's self. Remember that Jeremiah spoke God's promise of forgiveness and restoration before the storm even broke. Is it possible that we hold the world-changing truth in our hands, but miss the opportunity to share our joy in the living Lord?

That homecoming evening, I felt a stab of disappointment for the teenagers who had paid handsomely for their tickets to the homecoming dance. Nonetheless, they all seemed to have a really great evening. The school gym was still the school gym; no one was fooled. No one even cared about the minimal decorations or the mediocre D.J. In fact, I had missed the point entirely. You already know this. Our Christmas dance of joy and celebration has nothing to do with the tinsel or the food. It's not about the gifts we give and receive, or even the venue or the décor. As any teenager at the homecoming dance would tell us, Christmas is all about the company we keep, the community that loves and supports us. It is a good time to relish the promise of our own homecoming. In Christ, we can have no better partner for the dance. In our faith community, we are blessed with the best of company. And the Lord says, "my people shall be satisfied with my bounty". Happy New Year!

Amen.