

In the Beginning

Jeremiah 31: 7-14

John 1: 1-18

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Jeremiah 31: 7-14

For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, 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; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. 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. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

John 1: 1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Chances are you have seen or heard about the meme in which a small crowd of people are huddled together behind a wall and one of them is reaching around the corner to extend a very long stick to gently push open a door marked '2021.' There is only anxiety and uncertainty about what may lie over that threshold, so there is no eagerness for this new year, just plenty of hesitancy and caution. Chances are you may have also heard of the verbal cautionary warning for 2021—beware, this may just be 2020 now old enough to drink.

We certainly do not need to recap why entering this new year has some people wary and distrustful, why watching the calendar change at midnight on Jan 1st was not enough reassurance that 2020 had faded to the history books. We know that while there are vaccines now available and that in just a few months many of us will have received it, we also know that there are many dark days yet ahead of us before then. We also know that so many of the political, racial, climate and financial issues of 2020 are still with us; and although baby steps have been taken, there is a long, rocky and winding road yet to be traveled. We wonder what new, odd, unnerving and unsettling experiences await us in the coming months. As much as possible we cocoon in a self-protective, defensive emotional bunker as we watch from a constant state of alertness and we remain vigilant and cautious.

It is important that we have this approach, that we are careful as the world slowly reopens. Yet it is equally important that we do not lose sight of hope and optimism, that we see and value those baby steps toward better times, that we recognize the small, even seemingly insignificant, steps that are the beginning of the better times and opportunities.

We think nothing of flipping on the light switch and having a room brightened and fully lit, but the first electric light was so dim that a candle was needed to see its socket. A sightseeing pleasure cruise along the Hudson River takes about 2 hours, but the first steamboat took 32 hours to make that same trip. Flying just about anywhere on earth is an everyday, non-pandemic, event, yet the Wright brothers' first airplane flight lasted only 12 seconds. Driving 70 miles per hour on the highway is a common, typical experience, but the first automobiles traveled only 2 to 4 miles per hour and broke down often. Carriages would pass them with their passengers shouting, "Get a horse!"

Beginnings are about starting small. They are about having hope, confidence and faith. The many limits of a beginning can both hide and hint at future success. As the beautiful hymn by Natalie Sleeth reminds us, "In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree, in cocoons a hidden promise, butterflies will soon be free. In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

God's beginnings are about promise, light and life. John's Gospel tells us the Word was with God from the beginning, that not only was the Word with God, but that the Word was God. The Word, a clear reference from John referring to Jesus as "the Word" as the Jews often used this term to refer to God. They considered the "Word of God" to be the same as "God." Jesus existed not only before his incarnation but before all time. He was, and is, and is to come. John's Gospel begins with the revelation that Jesus is divine and present at the beginning of creation, and then in time dwelt among us. In the beginning of creation, all things, all life, came into being through him. In the incarnation, in the birth of the Messiah, the Redeemer, the Word is a tiny, fragile, newborn infant who in time has to learn words, and to speak. The eternal Word was present in a human child, and this was the beginning of Jesus' ministry. What came into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. His light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

For the people scurrying around Bethlehem as the census was taken, or the innkeeper who offered his stable to a woman in labor, no one could have imagined what would become of a baby boy whose life began on a bed of hay. For the shepherds who visited in awe of the baby in the manger, and as the Wise Men knelt in adoration to offer their precious gifts, none of them could have fully recognized what was begun that long ago evening.

Professor Joy J. Moore encourages us to see in the remembrance of the incarnation, “that God’s yet unfulfilled promises remain trustworthy. Whether in a person or a community, around us are indeed glimpses of God’s active grace, if we have the imagination to see. It is time to begin again. Life brings life, and the conclusion of one season commences a new opportunity to live into what is only possible with that end.”

God’s promises were prophesied by Jeremiah, to Ephraim, the strongest of the 10 tribes in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the home of the Ark of Covenant, where God offered renewal, reconnection, healing and hope as a father to Israel, and Ephraim as God’s firstborn, symbolizing that all who walk with God are God’s own children. As a prophet, Jeremiah preached quite a bit of doom and punishment, however, his message was ultimately one of repentance and restoration as Jeremiah’s love for the lost offered a way to see forward, to see that God had a plan, a new covenant, grounded in grace and hope as God stayed faithful to a people who had turned away. There would be a new exodus, and even for those who would be hard pressed to make the trip—the blind and the lame, even pregnant women or ones in labor--- they would be led back by a straight path. They would again know joy, plenty, comfort, gladness and satisfaction with the bounty God offered.

Just as God cared for, guided, and restored Israel so God continues to care for us, guide us, uphold and encourage us, and promises hope, life and redemption not because we have earned it, but because of God’s continuing gracious love and mercy. Our lives matter to God. God’s promise from the beginning of time came among us as a child in grace, mercy and love that the light might continue shining on in even the darkest of places, the darkest of years. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it, will not overcome it.

Our exodus of 2020 has led us to a new beginning and an old promise. 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, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

We too will again rejoice in the dance and be merry as God’s beginnings are about promise, light and life. Amen.