

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Tiffani Harris
Jeremiah's Healing Community
Jeremiah 31: 7-14; John 1:1-18
January 3, 2021

Well, we made it. Here we are, the first Sunday of 2021, and for many of us it may feel like an accomplishment or at least a milestone. It has been a tough year for so many, and we are not out of the woods yet. At least we are here. A new year. I have paid extra attention this year to the words of some of our Christmas carols. Many of them seem like they could have been written just for us this year. Hear the words to some of the songs we have sung recently. Just today, from *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*:

*O ye beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow . . .
look now . . . Rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing.*

Brett just sang *Nations That Long in Darkness Walked*:

Nations that long in darkness walked have seen the glorious light...

And last week, from *O Holy Night*:

*A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn . . .
led by the light of faith serenely beaming . . .
In all our trials, born to be our friend;
he knows our need, our weakness is no stranger . . .
Light and life to all he brings...*

The words to these old carols seem all too fitting today for our weary world. I can imagine that the exiled children of God during the time of Jeremiah, experienced much the same weariness that these songs address.

The prophet Jeremiah was not the most pleasant of persons. He was tasked with preaching and leading in a very difficult time in Israel's history. Jeremiah did not want this call from God. Several chapters earlier than today's lectionary passage, he had some harsh words for God who overpowered him with the task of being the mouthpiece for God. Most of his words to the children of God, call them back in repentance, exposing their sin, and detailing the consequences of their selfishness and sin. No one seemed to heed Jeremiah's words. He wasn't very well-liked. He was persecuted, imprisoned, rejected, had no family, and had a front row seat to the sins and evils of society that would make a Hollywood movie look tame. In chapter 31 of Jeremiah, we see a different side of the prophet. This little break in the book of Jeremiah is often called the "book of consolation" – a little reprieve of 4 chapters of hope. These words are most likely for the exiled people of God who have been defeated, dispersed, beaten down, and left behind. Dallas Willard is known for saying "God's address is at the end of your rope," and these exiled and exhausted people of God are at the end of their rope.

Jeremiah offers a communal word of hope to a weary people, casting a vision for a healing community where all are gathered in and renewed:

(v.8) God proclaims through the prophet: *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.*

Jeremiah goes on to say that God will replace their weeping with joy and lead them by streams of water like a Good Shepherd gathers and leads his flock. God will bring his children home. This is a homecoming. In contrast to their turbulent journey into exile, they will not stumble, the path will be smooth. The prophet proclaims that the Lord has redeemed them and the picture of hope that Jeremiah paints, is one of a community where those who are vulnerable are gathered in and companioned. They have left behind their former life of hardship and exile and replaced it with joy and singing. This is a restorative community where those who have struggled through no fault of their own: the blind, the lame, and laboring woman are nurtured into wholeness in the community. The marginalized are those hurt by power. The tables have turned, and now Israel is experiencing what it means to be forgotten. They are now the ones marginalized. The hope of God's redemptive community is for the suffering, which in reality is all of us. In Jeremiah's book of consolation, God sees the suffering of his people and walks with them as the shepherd, leading them each step of the way to bounty and safety. This is a community of shalom – a community of wholeness and restored life.

Jeremiah is pointing to the light, voicing a hope that they could not yet see. This is the same light that the Gospel of John describes – a light shining in the darkness. The darkness does not disappear, but the light, God's light, continues to illuminate. John's Gospel describes Christ as the Light, our source of redemption. Darkness and light are such strong metaphors in the book of John, and they give voice to the condition of our lives.

Surely Jeremiah's people of God lived in a time of societal darkness. As a people, they may have been depressed and dejected, as you can imagine anyone in exile might be. For many, all around the world this also has been a truly tough year for so many reasons. We don't have to search hard to find a lengthy list of losses that can describe 2020. All of these outward challenges of pandemic, division, and racial injustice, seem to mirror an inner darkness that can be just as disorienting as a pandemic.

The Celtic tradition describes inner spiritual darkness as "monastic disease" or *dis-ease*, as a way of understanding the human condition of brokenness. Monastic diseases are coping mechanisms, attitudes, habits, and actions that bring dis-ease to ourselves and others. We are often unaware of these repetitive thoughts and actions that distract us from our spiritual life and can leave us struggling under its weight.

As we begin a new year and enter the liturgical season of Epiphany this week, it is timely to consider the light of Christ that comes to our world and to our hearts and to ask these questions: What darkness in our hearts and in our lives hides God's light? What are the

unhealthy thoughts or beliefs that weigh us down and hinder our reception of God's light and redemption? Naming the darkness is the first step in opening our hearts to the invading healing light of Christ.

John 1 is hymn of praise that depicts Jesus Christ as the light that re-forms our inner self.

(v.3) 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.

(v. 12) But to all who received him, who believe in his name, he gave the power (or authority) 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.

Through Jesus Christ, the light of the world, we have a re-formation and new life. This is described in more detail later just 2 chapters later in John as Nicodemus questions Jesus about being reborn. This new birth signifies a re-forming from the inside out.

Christ, the Word become flesh, John's Gospel says, "lived among us, and we have seen his glory". The word here for "lived" actually means pitched his tent or tabernacled, giving new meaning to all of the passages about God's glory descending upon the tabernacle when the Israelites roamed the wilderness. It depicts the presence of God with them. It is a glorious mystery that the same God who formed the world came into the world to be with us. We are not alone, even when we cannot see it or feel it.

The season of Advent is about preparing, and the season of Christmas is about opening. We may think it is about what we can give to God, but the clearest way to understand our response to this indescribable gift is opening - opening our hearts to Immanuel, to God who walks with us. This is the beginning of life with God in all its fullness. This is where our reforming takes place.

In John's poetic description, the darkness does not dissipate but it also does not overcome the light. It would be nice to think that the darkness would leave, but it doesn't. Jeremiah pointed to this light when it was hard to see and we are called to do the same. The Gospel of John describes John the Baptist as "testifying to the light." We are all called to be "little John the Baptists" always pointing to the light. Theologian Karl Barth is said to have had a painting of the crucifixion hanging in his office. In this painting, at the bottom of the cross stands John the Baptist with his finger pointing at the cross. Barth is known for saying: "I want to be that finger." This is also our holy calling.

It is a calling for us individually and as a people. When darkness obscures the light, the people of God step in and point the way. As a church community, we can engage in spiritual practices that train us to notice the light and help us in claiming the redemption that Christ offers. We need each other, and Jeremiah makes it clear that in God's redeemed community, there is support and healing for all.

St. Ignatius modeled the prayer of Examen, as a way to challenge the people of God to name their consolation and their desolation regularly, inviting the light of Christ into those places. This practice is a particularly simple and effective habit for families to nurture together.

As I have grieved losses in my own life, praying the Psalms has become a helpful teacher and guide. Through the Psalms, I have learned to voice my own lament while also allowing the Psalms to teach me and to guide me and to form me by nurturing the habits of gratitude and confession. The Psalms have much to teach us about honesty and discipline in our prayer life.

If we were meeting all in this sanctuary together today, we might just stop for a moment as a stubborn act of hope and sing the childhood song “This Little Light of Mine.” In that song, you can’t hide the light of Christ under a bushel, and we won’t let Satan blow it out. If you have children in your life, let them remind you of the hope and light we have in Christ by singing this song together. Thanks be to God for the many ways our children lead us in realizing this kind of stubborn hope is exactly what this year has required from.

Jeremiah casts a vision for a healing community in which no one is left behind, always pointing towards the light and hope which can be hard to see at times. In this community of shalom, we companion each other in ways that open our hearts to God’s reformation and healing work. This has come to fulness in Jesus Christ who is our light. As a church community we can companion and walk alongside of each other pointing to the light just as John the Baptist did and just as Jeremiah did.

We can create intentional space and relationships where we can face our monastic diseases, allowing the healing light of Christ to invade the darkness within. This is tough and vulnerable work that requires us to trust and to be gracious, honest, and forgiving with each other. It requires that we seek God together in prayer and in small groups always pointing each other to the perfect love of Christ. If 2020 has taught us anything, it may just be how much we need each other and how much we need the community of God. It has made abundantly clear that the light the church has to offer is something this world desperately needs. In this new year, may we create space for God to work in and among us bringing about this vision of a redemptive community where all live with the assurance of God’s presence and light.

Let us pray together . . . I want to give you a moment to name the darkness that you recognize in your life and ask God to bring the light of Christ into that place . . .

Holy One, O Christ our Lord illumine and guide us into this new year. Increase our faith and give us eyes to see the light in the darkness. Have your way in us . . . help us to confess our struggles and sins to you . . . reform us from the inside out so that your light shines through us and in us, bringing about your healing community right here in this place. With all thanks to you Holy God, the Good Shepherd for walking with us bringing fullness of life through Christ Jesus. Amen.