

Second Sunday after Christmas

Al Krass

RCL: Jeremiah 31:7-14 or Sirach 24:1-12; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:(1-9) 10-18
LM: Sirach 24:1-2, 8-12; Psalm 147:12-13, 14-15, 19-20; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-18; John 1:1-18

It's not surprising that many people find activists like us "heavy." We're good at painting pictures of injustice and suffering. People rightly ask if we ever have good news to proclaim. Today's Scriptures are full of good news! It's important that we learn the lesson Jeremiah teaches: In the midst of suffering, God gives a vision of what comes after the suffering. Today's passage, which comes before all have been exiled to Babylon and elsewhere, is already about the joyful return from exile!

Jeremiah paints a beautiful picture. Can you imagine the procession? Listen to the people crying with joy! See the brooks of water along which they walk. Imagine them singing aloud on Mount Zion. Visualize the tables of grain, wine, and oil. Hear the sheep bleating. See the young and the old dancing and making merry. (And watch the clergy and lay people alike filling themselves up at the banquet!)

Think of the people in today's world whose lives have been decimated by years of famine and war. See those same people now living in abundance and peace. Third World countries have been given a fresh start, their indebtedness wiped out. Describe what universal education means. Picture children running off to school. Imagine mothers laughing, confident that their children will all survive, even while remembering the days when half the kids died before reaching the age of five. Whatever it is that service agencies have enabled your congregation to do, paint a picture of all that now completed! What do the farms look like? How do the people live? What does dignity look like? Paint this and say, "God has promised: it shall happen!" Psalm 147:13-14 provides such a picture of God's blessings for Israel.

One of my joys as a member of Old First Reformed United Church of Christ in Philadelphia is working with the family of Sam and Dorothy Juah, refugees who escaped from the Liberian civil war in the late 1990s and are now leaders in our church. It's encouraging to see their eight children—some biological and others adopted—growing up and participating in all parts of the church's mission. The Juahs know from painful experience—and remind us regularly—what great suffering they endured from war and tyranny, and later from their initial poverty in Philadelphia. But their joyous participation in God's mission now gives us even more confidence that God's deliverance is real. As the Juahs have been blessed, their family is now a blessing to many others.

The passage from Ephesians is also future-oriented. It tells of God's "plan for the fullness of time" (v. 10). As God promised, our destiny is to be Christ's full heirs. In the Holy Spirit we already have the pledge of our inheritance. As God's adopted children in Jesus, we're destined to "live for the praise of his glory" (v. 12), because God determined that we shall be redeemed. When God makes a commitment, God accomplishes it! Living in hope as we do is to have this confidence and, while we await its fulfillment, to be overflowing with praise, for we know God's already begun doing it. If we approached our work for justice and dignity with this kind of radiant hope, how different it might seem! Out of our anxiety we've been known to lay guilt on people. But Ephesians tells us not to be anxious but to abound in hope. If God has lavished on us the riches of his grace, we can be sure: God wants to lavish that on everyone.

For John 1:1-14, see the notes for Christmas Day (p. 20). The unique themes of today's longer

passage, themes we might relate to the reading from Jeremiah, concern what we've received from Christ and how this gift has transformed our lives. We have received "power to become children of God" (v. 12) and "grace upon grace" from Christ's "fullness" (v. 16). The images are of abundance, especially abundant life. Bringing us abundant life is the reason for his coming (John 10:10). In contrast to Moses' gift, from Christ we've received grace and truth, not a list of oughts and shoulds. Receiving grace and truth is our gift of abundance from God.

In your sermon you might want to speak of our motivation for engaging in advocacy for those who are poor and hungry. It's not because of the requirements of the law that we do this, but because we are filled to overflowing with the grace we have received from God. We want to share it with everyone. We don't believe that God wants anyone who lives in creation to do without abundance.

Children's Time [Larry Hollar]

Ask how many children have ever gone to a parade. Perhaps they remember something from the Fourth of July or another holiday or another procession. Perhaps the parade ended with a picnic or some other chance for people to share food. Have them recall the joy and excitement they felt. Remind them that God's people remembered with joy their love for Jerusalem when they came back after being far away for a long time. They probably didn't march back in a parade, but the same excitement we feel is like their joy in coming home. We're grateful for a God who brings us back home.

Musical Suggestions [Larry Hollar]

We're Marching to Zion—SZ 3

You Are Our Living Bread—GC 819

You Are God's Work of Art—GC 810