

text: Jeremiah 31:10-14

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HEAR AND DECLARE

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I watched one of those news magazine shows last night. One of the segments dealt with New Age Spirituality--that path toward spiritual fulfillment that focuses on Channellers, Chrystal power and the wisdom of extra-terrestrial beings. I could only grieve at the great spiritual void that so many people feel these days. And I thought about today's sermon. I thought, "All the more reason to HEAR the word of the Lord and DECLARE it to the faraway places.

Allow me to put our scripture reading in context. The nation of Israel had already fallen. Much of Judah had suffered the same fate. Soon, Jerusalem, herself would fall and the Jews would go into captivity in Babylonia. In the midst of this time of turmoil, a prophet lifted his voice--a prophet named Jeremiah. And in the way of the prophets, Jeremiah spoke warnings to both his own nation and to foreign nations, that unless they returned to the ways of Righteousness, God would bring his vengeance upon them.

But sandwiched in between those two warnings, first to Judah and later to other nations, Jeremiah wrote the words of our scripture lesson--words of reconciliation, restoration and hope. Words that speak through poetry rather than prose. Words that spoke to the people who would hear them in Jeremiah's day and words that speak to us now, even in the season of Christmas.

To the ancient ear, these words addressed specific and relevant themes. "Hear and Declare" the oracle begins. Hear the message of God and declare it in even the farthest places. For the God who scattered us will yet gather us together again. How can this be? It can be because the Lord has rescued us from forces too strong for us to conquer alone. And when gathered together again, the children of God shall rejoice.

The ancient inhabitant of Jerusalem understood that an angry God had caused the downfall of Israel and Judah because the people had turned away from the paths of righteousness. The people had been scattered and the only way the people of the land would be gathered together again would be by Yahweh's power, for the hands of the Babylonians were too strong for them to overcome on their own.

And when that re-gathering occurred, there would be

great rejoicing, not only because the nation had been regathered, but because life would then be a life of fullness--with all the necessities provided in a manner not unlike that of a shepherd who regathers a flock that has been scattered. And the passage tells the people that when that reunion occurs, grain, wine and oil--the staples of that culture--would be plentiful. Also, mourning would turn to joy and sorrow to gladness and the souls of the priests would feast in abundance. And the scripture reading closed with these hopeful words, especially hopeful to those who had been conquered: ". . . and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, says the Lord."

Certainly those must have been comforting words to the people who heard Jeremiah's oracles. But we are not an ancient people. We are the people of the 1980's. What can these words offer to us--what hope? What comfort? Our land has not been conquered and our people scattered by a warring modern-day counterpart to Babylonia. What is there in these words that we can hear and then declare to the farthest places, to the coastlands afar off?

In physical terms we might speak of our mobile society scattering us--at one time in my life, I was in Alabama, a fact that Mark Dunn finds particularly satisfying. Perhaps that's why he gave me grits for Christmas. I was in Alabama, my Father was living in Denver, my Mother in Tulsa, and my brothers in Kansas City and Paris, France. We were scattered. And, indeed, with the dramatic increase of mobility in our world, people and families and even cultures are being scattered. But, for my purposes this morning I think we would benefit more from considering how, SPIRITUALLY we have become scattered. For in the spiritual realm, I believe we will find more comparisons with the situation of Ancient Judah.

Because of our human nature, we are scattered far and wide, spiritually speaking. I've struggled with understanding who or what has conquered, bound and scattered us. I first thought that ideas have conquered and scattered us. But that was not sufficient. Perhaps one could say that God has allowed us to be scattered - by allowing us a free will. Even better, we have conquered ourselves by the exercising of our free will. For in the use of that free will, by ascribing to various ideas, by choosing our own paths, we become dispersed across a wide spectrum of theological perspectives. The popular picture of that spectrum places literalist fundamentalists on one end and Unitarian skeptics on the other. And Christians are scattered across that spectrum, frequently arguing with one another over their religious differences--take the current Southern Baptist situation as a case in point. They battle now over conflicting ideas of the authority of Scripture. And sometimes, as history ancient and current shows, we even come to blows, actually warring with each other over

matters of faith.

And not unlike the ancient Jew we are bound into captivity by hands that are too strong for us. The hands that bind us are not those of a conquering military power. The hands that bind us to our scattered places are hands shaped by ideas. Whether we are bound in our place on the theological spectrum by ideas of literalism or independence, evangelism or mysticism, ritual or Christian social action, whatever ideas bind us, it is only the grace of God that will gather us back together. The vast numbers of denominations in the Christian faith witness to the scattered nature of Christians. But the important point to make--the critical point is that the image of the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, that we have seen just this past week, is a restoring and, in the Christian world, a universal vision of God's love. And as ". . . the Lord has ransomed Jacob, . . ." in that vision of the Christ child, God has rescued us from our scattered lives and brought us the opportunity to walk together, together again as the related and caring family of God.

It is ours to hear that message of reconciliation in the innocent Christ, to hear the word of the Lord, and declare it to the coastlands afar off. For in declaring that message of love, in declaring those tidings of comfort and joy, in declaring that profound word that God can indeed come to us in concrete and tangible ways, not just in the abstract, but in real ways that can involve us in an expression of Divine Love. In declaring that which we have heard, we help to turn Mourning into joy and sorrow into gladness, and we help to provide something that will fill that spiritual void felt by all too many in our world. In that message, wherein we acknowledge our commonality rather than our separateness, we bring abundance into all our lives; a spiritual fullness that is worthy of our pursuit.

Carl Knudsen has written of an orphan in a particular orphanage. One Christmas, all the children received baskets of fruit. All but one boy immediately devoured the food. This solitary exception, instead, put his basket in the window. When asked why he didn't eat any of the fruit, he replied, "I want to keep my present so people can see that someone cared for me on Christmas." The boy wanted to declare to the world the word of love that he had heard through a gift.

If we, this Christmas, have heard the word of the Lord, then we ought next to declare that Word. And with the declaration of the Christmas message, perhaps we will be satisfied with the goodness of the Lord.

Hear the word of the Lord. We have allowed our family of God to be scattered. The wonderful and creative diversity that our varied perspectives produce can be

harmful, however, if we don't on occasion, take note of those things we hold in common.

We can be gathered together again. We have been shown a way that will release us from the bonds of ideas that scatter us. The reconciling and restoring love of God has come into the world, not by way of fantasy or wishful thinking, but by way of a real child. That word has been offered to us so that once again we might not only sing and dance, but we might sing and dance TOGETHER, all enjoying the fulness of God's word and all being satisfied with the goodness of the Lord.

Declare to the coastlands afar off, and even to your next door neighbor, tidings of comfort and joy. For to us, in the city of David, a savior has been born who is Christ the Lord!

amen.