

The Second Sunday after Christmas
January 2, 2022, Year C
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15,19-23; Psalm 84

*[T]heir 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.*

This portion of the book of the prophet Jeremiah, written more than 2600 years ago, always catches my attention. My old knees make it hard for me to “rejoice in the dance,” but for sure I am a priest who has my “fill of fatness”! But I do wonder today, are these verses a religious version of so many of the memes that I have scrolled past on Facebook and Twitter this week? Instead of “Good riddance to 2021!” and, “2022 cannot help but be better,” Jeremiah seems to be saying, “All you have to do is believe in God, and the good times will come back!”

After two years of masks and social distancing and jostling about for vaccinations and boosters, I know that I am not the only one that ended 2021 with a case of COVID and a holiday in isolation. I know that some of you, and some of the ones that you love, are beginning 2022 that way. And through the millennia we hear the voice of Jeremiah’s consolation, “I will turn their mourning into joy. . . and give them gladness for sorrow,” and we wonder, “When?” When will it be that this particular mourning will turn into gladness?

This is my first time back in this pulpit since I left for sabbatical on November 20. My one month away was followed by ten days of COVID isolation. I am grateful to all of you for providing me with sabbatical time—an intentional space for rest and refreshment. I am glad that I had access to testing and found out about my COVID infection before I could infect anyone except my own dear husband—or maybe we were infected together, who knows? And I am grateful for the vaccinations and antibody therapy that made our course of the illness manageable. I would like to stand up here this morning and have some great insight and perspective to share with you, some wisdom that I gleaned during my time apart for reflection, or some joy that I discovered as my body recovered from the effects of viral infection.

Alas. I have nothing new to impart. But then, what wisdom could I have to compare with the new and transformed life that God offers each one of us this morning? Because here is the thing. I could make a list of all the terrible things and nasty challenges that 2021 had to offer. And I bet you could, too. We have lost beloved friends and family members. There

have been life-altering accidents and frightening natural disasters. The shortages of personnel have not helped us in our struggles to care for one another or our property. And even the calmest, most sensible approach to social distancing for the sake of avoiding a virus has led to devastating mental health consequences throughout our society. But for me, that list is overtaken, obliterated, made meaningless by the absolutely amazing fact of the birth of my grandson. Whatever else 2021 had to offer, August Edward was born on November 20 and the world was made immeasurably richer and more wonderful. As far as that goes, his brother, Harry, was born in 2019. So, COVID19—Harry? I have to say that the light of Harry's life overtakes the darkness even of a global pandemic in the way my life is ordered.

And isn't my small family experience—my delight in my grandsons—isn't that the grand theological insight that we celebrate this morning of the ninth day of Christmas? God broke into history with the birth of a baby. And not just any baby! As exciting as we might find the birth of Sylvia, who starred in our four-church Christmas pageant, or Gus, who starred in the Stroud family Thanksgiving party—as personally exciting as those births are—in Jesus, God was born as one of us. Emmanuel—God with us. Jesus—the one who saves.

And our Gospel today reminds us that just as with any other baby, the birth of Jesus happened at a time of intense upheaval in the life of the people. Herod's reign as king was so precarious that the birth of a poor child in a small village felt threatening—so threatening that he ordered the death of all the children. Our reading for this morning leaves out those bloody verses about the death of the Innocents, in much the same way that we try so hard not to think about school shootings or the terrors faced by refugees of all types. But even truncated, Matthew's account lets us understand some of the terror felt by Joseph as he tried to protect the Child and his Mother. Joseph's dreams and the grace of God helped him work out what to do. And so, they refuged—away from a political mess into a foreign land. And there they stayed, until it was safe to come home.

Just a few verses are intended to impart years of pain and suffering. Let it sink in for a moment. And the next time you see an image on the television news or see an article in the newspaper about refugees—sit with it for a time. Reflect on the pain and suffering now and remember that when God became one of us, God did not just inhabit our joy. God took on our pain and sorrow, too.

In those days, when the Holy Family walked to Egypt and lived there for a time, they had no Facebook or Twitter to keep them occupied. But of course, they did have holy Scripture. They had the long witness of the prophet Jeremiah, who in the middle of recounting his oracles inserted a little Book of Consolation:

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I wonder if Mary and Joseph recited those verses of courage and hope to help themselves through their lonely days of exile? I hope so. Because even when I am not very good at reading and studying holy Scripture every day, I do read these verses every year on the second Sunday after Christmas and I remember—remember that feeling the sorrow and pain of isolation and exile is nothing new for the people of God.

A baby was born to show us that new life is always available for us, always there to greet us, even in the midst of a world of sorrow and pain and ecological and political disaster. We Christians call it the incarnation—the understanding that our God—the same God who created the world and us in it—God also became one of us. **The incarnation is the theological idea that God loves us from the inside out, as well as from the outside in.**

I still wish that I had some grand, new, and startling theological insight to offer you this morning. But the truth is that there is nothing new about the Incarnation. Even six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Jeremiah understood this about God—God loves us all the way through. God understands our pain and sorrow, and our joy and triumph. Jeremiah's consolation is our hope.

What do you hope for 2022? I am guessing that we could sit here for another hour or so and write out a long list. My list would be about our property and our programs and my house and my children and maybe even my "fill of fatness," to give Jeremiah his due. But of course, my list of desires for things in 2022 is entirely overcome by my hopes for my grandchildren, and children, for my friends, for my parishioners. My hope is that we will all grow in God's love and grace—that we will know the presence of God in our lives and be a light of God's presence to others.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! May you dance with joy, have your fill of fatness, and know the immeasurable love of the God who lives with us, and in us, and through us in Jesus our Savior.