

Jeremiah 31:7-14

⁷ 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."

⁸ 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.

⁹ With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations^[a] 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.

¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

¹² 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.

¹³ 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.
¹⁴ I will give the priests their fill of fatness,
and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty,
says the LORD.

Revelation 21:1-6

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals.
He will dwell^[b] with them;
they will be his peoples,^[c]
and God himself will be with them;^[d]
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

“A Light for a New Path”
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee
January 3, 2021

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

One of the lasting delights I have in remembering my grandmother, whom we called Bam, is the way that she would quote texts that were previously unfamiliar to me in a way that has them linger in memory. The one I want to pass along to you is something I recall every year at this time. Recalling it in order to share a passage in a newsletter some years ago, I determined to learn the name of the author. So, today I can tell you that Minnie Louise Haskins lived from 1875 – 1957 and was an English teacher and writer whose poem *Desert*, or ‘God Knows’ has been quoted by people more illustrious than I, including George VI in his Christmas broadcast of 1939. For my part, I have only ever been familiar with the first several lines I will share now as we mark the beginning of a new year and new relationship together:

“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’

And he replied: ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’”

I love this passage more than I can say, and have rested on it for comfort at nearly every juncture of change in my life. Where and how do we find comfort in the present and confidence in our future, when the known is far from settled or easy? I found a second and similarly familiar phrase out of context in another Google search this week and will share in next Wednesday’s Visitor the full poem by Arthur E. Ritchie that has also made its way through generations. It, too, suggests that the reader should lean in faith on God, who will light or open up the way ahead. While these are excellent words to hear, it may be that the assurances they provide don’t always resonate; it may be that the pandemic that rages and other pains and difficulties in the past several years shake too firmly for any of us to feel that the way ahead is clear. So, perhaps we may look to scripture this morning to discover companions who found themselves in familiar circumstances.

I shared with those of you who were able to attend our Zoom worship two weeks ago that I have nearly always preached from the lectionary, those scriptural texts assigned for particular days in the Christian year. Maybe you can join me in musing, then, why I was drawn to include texts for both a celebration of New

Years, as we come together newly as pastor and people, as the Body of Christ and, this morning, in Communion. We celebrate our togetherness as we look both backward and forward in hope and faith. I also want to be sure that we mark Epiphany, which falls this coming Wednesday, but only *begins* with the story of the wise travelers who first recognized who Jesus was as a newborn king. It feels important this morning for all of us to mark the ways that the identity of Jesus is revealed little by little through the season of Epiphany ahead, and what it is about knowing Jesus that offers us hope. So, why look to Jeremiah, the youthful prophet who so often was rejected by those who heard him?

Carolyn J. Sharp, who is Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Yale Divinity School can help us to understand what reading about a prophet from 2600 years ago has to share with us. She writes, “The poet depicts a journey of transformation marked by lingering sorrow, brilliantly authorizing the grief of a community still waiting for the Lord and unable to forget what they have lost.” She goes on to say that “In the aftermath of destruction, it is a complicated thing to hope again. The experience of healing can be painful as well as joyous.” It may be that you aren’t entirely familiar with the context of Jeremiah’s writing, which is important in two ways: *Israel has been deported—exiled by the Babylonians—and as such is suffering from every sense of disconnect and also of a sense of disempowerment. They also are scolded though, as Jeremiah often does, for being disobedient; for themselves moving spiritually farther away from God. So, he calls for repentance, nearly in the same breath as he offers deep consolation.* Sharp writes further in a way that we may hear very clearly in the midst of the fears and losses of Covid: “A people formed by this prophetic word learns that death and loss are inescapable and that repentance is always necessary (Jeremiah 7:3-7, 18:1-11, 29:11-14), yet grace will abound. The challenge is to move forward faithfully in the present moment, trusting that through grace, the life of the reformed community can become “like a watered garden” (Jeremiah 31:12; cf. Hosea 14:5-8, Isaiah 58:11) — Gospel word indeed.”

Maybe this just sounds like pretty words, though, when the pain of loss is fresh or the fear of what may come is sharp. Jeremiah writes, though, not only with personal understanding of displacement and mourning, but also with the experience of reconciliation and a return home. The people of Israel were able to return to Jerusalem and in response sang praises to God, whom they credited not for the evil that had befallen them by the Babylonians, but for all the good that came to them in their restoration. We have new hope lately, that with the promise of vaccinations we will have protection against the virus; we take comfort that the virulence of the virus can be abated by new therapies. I spoke this week with a dear friend who is a pharmacologist at Regeneron, the company responsible for

one of the antibody therapies not yet in wide distribution. Somehow our conversation moved between his sadness at his mother's recent death and his hopefulness that comes from science. Ours are often conversations that push limits for each of us: scientific for me, and spiritual for him. In fact, in asking his permission to share with you this morning, he asked that he be noted as a "devout atheist." Still, we both have to acknowledge that there are limits to our understanding, and therefore to our belief. In speaking about what he *feels* of his mother's presence with him, he says that he can't explain it, but is more than happy to believe it, as the comfort it offers is so strong. He would like to have certain knowledge of eternal life; he would like to have certain knowledge of a future reunion. For now, I suggested, you may take one step forward, hoping that is true, in some way similarly to your having taken one step forward at a time with experiments that led to discovering the monoclonal antibodies that are helping keep people alive now.

This is the way that I read the beautiful, reassuring passage from Revelation that we heard earlier. As the prophet Jeremiah had been through painfully difficult times with the people of Israel, John also likely had been exiled to Patmos, where he received his vision, his prophecy of the coming of God's reign on earth. In the midst of exile, John writes that God will wipe away every tear. Don't you wish you could be so sure? Jeremiah and John would have us be so sure. Millie Haskins and Arthur Ritchie would have us be so sure. I would have us be so sure, because if we look back, as closely looking for moments of grace as for moments of suffering, we *will* see them. We can believe with the prophets that with God, healing is possible and newness is inevitable. What that newness will bring has much to do with us and with our openness to finding grace within it. We can elect to look backwards entirely, and in so doing grow discouraged by difficulty in the moment, or we can sculpt our understanding of the past as leaving us open for even greater change. I pray that we may do so now, and I pray that *in* so doing we may find the Communion that Jesus ushered in symbolically at the Last Supper, and that we all may look forward to in the coming reign of God, in which we have a part to play. How will we be part of the necessary reconciliation among all humans, even our closest neighbors? How will we be part of wiping away every tear? We do so with a single step forward at a time, on a path lighted by God who has given us every tool for loving relationship. May it be so for us.

Let us pray: Oh God, help us to see our way forward past fear, past hurt, past illness and even past death. Please be the lamp to guide us in hope and faith, so that we may also be a comfort to others. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.