

THEY WILL COME

JEREMIAH 31:7-14

This is what the LORD says:

"Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.
Make your praises heard, and say,
'O LORD, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.'

⁸ See, I will bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.
Among them will be the blind and the lame,
expectant mothers and women in labor;
a great throng will return.

⁹ They will come with weeping;
they will pray as I bring them back.
I will lead them beside streams of water
on a level path where they will not stumble,
because I am Israel's father,
and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

¹⁰ "Hear the word of the LORD, O nations;
proclaim it in distant coastlands:
'He who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.'

¹¹ For the LORD will ransom Jacob
and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

¹² They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—
the grain, the new wine and the oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.
They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more.

¹³ Then maidens will dance and be glad,
young men and old as well.

I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

¹⁴ I will satisfy the priests with abundance,
and my people will be filled with my bounty,"
declares the LORD.

Happy New Year! It was 75 degrees in sunny during our week-long trip to San Diego to visit my family. We had a great visit with my dad, sisters, brother, and my nieces and nephews. My father, who is getting up there in years, clings to this New Year's prayer: God, grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway, The good fortune to run into the ones that I do, And the eyesight to tell the difference. He recently went to the doctor and asked for a complete check up, including an IQ test. After the battery of tests, the doctor told him all of the tests came back negative, including the IQ test. He went home happy, for as they say, ignorance is bliss.

All of us are hoping for a happier new year, not only for ourselves, but also for our friends and families, and not only them but for our state and country, and not just for our nation but all nations in our world. In the past year we have witnessed those close to us losing their jobs, others who have struggled to find work while falling behind on their bills, and some who have tragically died. My wife was diagnosed with cancer recently and will have surgery in two weeks. My mother in-law is starting her fifth year on chemotherapy. Tomorrow I will be meeting with a man to discuss what he would like me to say at his funeral. He asked me to also tell him everything I know about the afterlife. After our meeting he has an appointment at a funeral home to take care of his arrangements.

This may seem a little peculiar to you, but I think it is time to throw a party. Not a little church party with the traditional potluck and 3 bean casserole, but an extravagant party with wine, merriment, music, fine food, and dancing. It should be an intergenerational party lasting not hours, not days, but for a lifetime. That is the kind of party that God is inviting us to, not just in some life after death realm, but starting here, today.

This morning's text from Jeremiah paints such a scene, and it must be noted that the party that God is inviting the people to comes not in some end of time scenario,

or at a moment in history when all is well and everyone is happy. God's invitation to the cosmic party comes when times are hard, when people are suffering, when all hope is lost, where the weak are oppressed and the outcast have no hope.

Not too long ago, when tragedy or hard times would fall on our country, people would flock into churches and attendance would increase dramatically. Sunday school classes were filled, finding teachers required less coercion, and committee members were not so hard to find. But that isn't happening now, at least in this environment. In fact, church attendance and belief in God continues on a downward spiral. The days of opening the church doors and expecting newcomers to join us are over. We live in what church historians are calling a post-Christian era, especially here in New England where church attendance is the lowest in the nation. Many churches are closing their doors, while others are responding by shrinking staffs, chopping budgets and cutting programs. Is our church far behind?

The church needs a big miracle if it is to have any relevance in our community in the 21st century.

One of the few miracles found in all four of the Gospels is the feeding of the 5000. You remember the story where Jesus is healing the sick and teaching the 5000 about the coming of God's new kingdom and how things will be better for the poor, the lame, and the outcast, and they are out in the middle of nowhere without any food, and the disciples tell Jesus that he should send them home to eat. Instead, Jesus felt compassion on them, and asked if anyone had some food prepared. The disciples shrugged their shoulders, reminding Jesus that the stores were closed, and that they would need to cut out their giving to the food pantry and homeless shelter. Then, out of nowhere, a young child perks up and says, "This morning, before I left, my mom packed me a nice lunch of 5 loaves of bread and a couple of fish." When the laughter stopped, Jesus blessed the food and had the deacons distribute it to the 5000, and when the deacons returned not only had all the people eaten and were filled, but the leftovers were plentiful.

Why did so many people follow Jesus? Because they wanted their lives changed. They were in search of meaning, seeking for hope, desiring transformation, and that's what Jesus offered them. Something was missing in their lives, and what Jesus offered them was a life of wholeness, a life of meaning, a life worth living.

That is the same thing that people need today; a life of wholeness, a life with meaning, a life worth living. People have been searching for years by pouring

themselves into their careers, or into relationships, only to find that something is still missing, and the last place most people expect to find meaning is in a church.

Why is that? Well, there are a variety of explanations, and I'll just briefly touch on a couple of them. Many churches are nothing more than exclusive clubs that are leery of outsiders. In those churches members have a sense of entitlement based upon their years of service or the amount of time or financial resources they give to the church. When they don't get their way or they feel slighted, they act like bullies or throw tantrums like spoiled 2 year olds. Most pastors and church leaders don't have the gumption to stand up to them, so the bullies end up getting their way and the church suffers.

The greatest factor hindering churches from growing, however, is the fact that those of us who have had our lives transformed, fail to tell others about it. We can get excited about a new book, our team winning a football game, the UConn Women's basketball team, a new diet, but God forbid we get excited about our faith and relationship with God. That's personal, we say, right up there with politics and sex, and nice people don't talk about those things for fear of looking weird or fanatical.

The mission of the church is not about opening our doors and hoping people will come in. The mission of the church requires us to open the doors so that we can go out and bring people in. And why would they want to come? Because God is throwing a party, not just for you and me, but for them, for those who are broken, for those who are outcast, for those who are poor. The church is the place where lives are transformed, but the world will only hear it and see it if we go out and tell them our story and share with them our life.

I have never met anyone who wanted to join a church so they could serve on a committee and attend long meetings. People who want to do that usually join a club like the Lions or Rotary. People who join churches join because they want to journey with others on a spiritual path to wholeness. They want to not only be transformed, but they want to be part of a community of friends who believe that God is still calling us to change the world.

My hope is that this in this new year we can be a church that is willing to try new things that will enable us to grow and to be the church that God is calling us to be.