

“Christmas Consolations”

The Reverend Allison Caudill

St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky

The Second Sunday of Christmas – 3 January 2021

Merry Christmas! It is still Christmas, as my family is tired of hearing me remind at every opportunity. The year of our Lord 2020 has come to an end, and many of us watched the clock strike midnight to begin 2021. Like the pandemic, the masks, the losses, the joys, and the changes that we have not left behind in the old year, Christmas continues into this new year. The joy of the incarnation, the greatest gift ever given, the empty stable filled with the light of the world, remains at the center of our Christian life, our liturgy, and our prayer.

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Every Sunday, and every morning during the week in Morning Prayer, we pray written prayers that capture a theme from the readings or of the season. These prayers, called collects, serve to collect our individual prayers and questions and desires and center us in the faith that unites us to one another in God. With a few exceptions, the collects share a similar structure. We address God, we say something we know to be true about God, we ask something of God, and we acknowledge that it is through the movement of the Holy Spirit and the Advocacy of Christ that we are asking. During the Christmas season, our Collects focus on the Incarnation, the fulfilled promise of God through the birth of our Savior in vulnerable human flesh.

For the four weeks of Advent, as we prepared to celebrate the birth of our Savior on Christmas Day, we heard from significant prophets, including Isaiah, and Mary, and Nathan, and John the Baptist. These prophets heard the Word of God and proclaimed it to the world with their voices and with their lives and even with their bodies. Today we hear from another prophet, Jeremiah. The prophet Jeremiah, like most true prophets, was not particularly popular. Like John, he criticized the religious elites for their hypocritical ways and called all Israel to repentance. Like Nathan, he challenged those in authority to look for God’s work in their lives and to trust in God’s guidance. Like Mary, Jeremiah reminded all who would listen that it is the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely who are closest to the heart of God, not those on the thrones of power and privilege. And like Isaiah, Jeremiah proclaimed that the promises of God are unfailing, even when all hope seems lost and the balance of power is on its head.

Jeremiah was preaching to a people who believed they had it made, even while enemies grew in stature on their borders and corruption and self-righteousness plagued their houses of power. His prophesies were met with anger, fear, derision, and persecution. Jeremiah disrupted the comfortable, and questioned those things which others believed unquestionable. And yet today,

we meet a Jeremiah in rare form, a prophet whose heart is bursting with hope. Jeremiah knew before anyone else that his people were going to suffer. But Jeremiah also knew that the God of Israel keeps his promises, and that redemption would come. These words we hear today are preemptive words of consolation for a people on the brink of ruin, promises for a future in which wrongs would be made right and the diaspora would be brought home. Scholars call this section of Jeremiah The Little Book of Consolations, because for a brief three chapters, the prophet paints a picture of the world on the other side of the imminent misery. On this ninth day of Christmas, in the dawn of a new year, we are being consoled.

How truly timely it is, how needful, that we are offered a little Consolation at the turning point of years and seasons. A fervently prayed-for vaccine is already being administered to our vulnerable and our essential ones, including some members of our own parish community. In the same breath, many of us celebrate with those who receive this miraculous protection while grieving the ones who were lost before it could be made available to them. For many, the Christmas season has been one of gritted teeth and “just getting through” and hoping with everything we have that soon things will be different. Our community is praying and discerning financial gifts and commitments for the new year, and some among us are preparing to take on new leadership roles while others are nearing the end of their term of service. We are missing and praying for our rector and his family as he seeks healing and wholeness, and we are painfully aware of the many beloved traditions and events that will continue to look different in 2021 as we remain unable to gather safely. What an incredible God we serve, that words he inspired thousands of years ago to comfort a desolate people would speak to us today. For thus says the Lord:

“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. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations 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.”

Before they were even scattered, God was promising his children that he would gather them back together. Before they had even been exiled, God was promising his people that he would bring them home. And not just those who would be strong enough for the journey, not just those who were able and willing to brave the desert’s challenges. God promises that he will bring home the disabled ones, by making the path straight and free of obstacles. God promises that he will bring home pregnant and laboring women, those who will need protection and refreshment from the brooks of water as they carry the future generations of the people back to their ancestral home. God promises to lead the weeping and the desolate with consolations and with his own guiding hand like a shepherd leads his sheep. The people shall not stumble, not because they are strong and sturdy and able, but because God is their father and protector, valuing them not for what they can do but for who they are to him.

And what will the children of God do in response to this homecoming?

They shall come and sing, they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, they shall celebrate the abundance of their reunion and they shall dance with rejoicing. God will turn their mourning into joy, comforting them and giving them gladness for sorrow. Like a watered Garden, the people of God will be sown in good soil, tended and cared for by the gentle hands of their creator, and they shall never languish again. Young and old, men and women, able and disabled will be gathered together again, the family of God reunited in joy.

In the middle of a Christmas season unlike any other, the promise of reunion is a consolation offered to the depths of our hearts. We will be the weeping multitude, guided by the very hand of God to a place of comfort and joy. We will be the present and future generations brought to a familiar and abundant place. We will be the scattered remnant, gathered together like so many lost sheep, redeemed from hands too strong for us. God has promised us a reunion, a homecoming, and our God always keeps his promises. We know that we have a home and that we will return to it together because God himself made his home among us. God himself, God with us, Immanuel, did not wait for us to find our own way in the desert. Christ did not leave us to fend for ourselves in our brokenness. The Word of God, the very breath of life, breathed with lungs like ours, wept with eyes like ours, laughed with a belly like ours, and prayed with a voice like ours. The divine life humbled itself to our humanity, and because even this impossible promise has been kept, we know that we will be restored to one another. Hear the consolation offered to us today. This is still Christmas.