

Second Sunday of Christmas, Year C

January 3, 2010

Jeremiah 31: 7-14, Psalm 147: 12-20, Ephesians 1: 3-14, John 11: 1-18

### **Jeremiah 31: 7-14**

<sup>7</sup>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." <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

### **Psalm 147: 12-20**

<sup>12</sup>Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!

<sup>13</sup>For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you.

<sup>14</sup>He grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat.

<sup>15</sup>He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.

<sup>16</sup>He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes.

<sup>17</sup>He hurls down hail like crumbs— who can stand before his cold?

<sup>18</sup>He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.

<sup>19</sup>He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel.

<sup>20</sup>He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances. Praise the Lord!

### **Ephesians 1: 3-14**

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <sup>5</sup>He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup>In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup>that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup>he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <sup>11</sup>In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <sup>12</sup>so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup>In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; <sup>14</sup>this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

### **John 1: 1-18**

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. <sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in

his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. <sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup>(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup>The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

During the early centuries of Christianity, particularly after it became the established and dominant religion, women and men, perhaps by the thousands, went out into the deserts to live lives of what they considered heroic sanctity and sacrifice. Some lived alone and others in small communities, who lived "alone together". They were probably odd folks to begin with, but long years of prayer, fasting, silence, and desert sun had to have added to it.

Strange as these people were, it is even stranger that they actually sound up having some pretty relevant insights into human nature, usually expressed in short stories or pithy sayings. It seems that without all of the distractions or escapes we enjoy, they were left to wrestle with demons, angles, and their own selves. Much of this "wisdom from the desert" is very practical and, once read, seemingly self-evident.

Here's an example. An older monk, revered for his great holiness and wisdom, was visiting various monasteries and other hermits. He was traveling with a young apprentice (that's how others were "trained" in those days). They came to a river that was probably shoulder deep at the middle and had a bit of a current, but was not impossible to cross. Already waiting there was a young woman, who happened to be very attractive, who was unable to cross because she didn't know how to swim. She asked if the monks could help her and, without a word, the older monk hoisted her up on his shoulders and took her across. Once there, he put her down, she thanked him, and she went off on her way. After this incident, the two monks walked along for several miles and several hours in silence, which was not unusual. Suddenly, the younger apprentice screamed out, "How could you do that? You know that our way of life forbids touching a woman! How could you?" The old, wise, revered, and holy monk calmly answered, "I performed a simple act of charity for someone in need. Certainly there is no law against that. I put that woman down a long time ago, but you are the one who is still carrying her."

Anyway, you would think that loneliness, harsh living conditions, or deprivation would be the main "enemies" of the desert mothers and fathers, but it actually turned out to be something much more subtle. The real

culprit was something they named *acedia*, or “the demon of the noon day sun”. It is a loss of passion, something related to but much deeper than boredom.

What does this have to do with anything? Why am I telling you these things?

These days, after the celebrations of Christmas and New Year, when the weather is cold and the days are short, are times when it can be difficult to be excited about or passionate about much of anything.

The second reading and the Gospel are prayer and poetry and, as such, are better “experienced” than intellectually dissected. In fact, I was left kind of cold by some of the commentaries this week. What struck me most this week about the readings is not *what* they said, as beautiful and theologically charged as they are, but *how* they said it. There is a palpable air of hope, joy, celebration, wonder, awe, gratitude, mystery, and newness.

The commentaries say that the eleven dense verses we heard from the *Letter to the Ephesians* today, for as tortured as the English was, are, in the original Greek, one long sentence. Wow! Even in the sometimes awkward English translation, it’s almost as though the author just couldn’t seem to get the words out fast enough. The words seem to “trip” over each other. This person was definitely “geeked out” by the Gospel message of who God is and what God is up to in the world. Could you feel that?

It is impossible, of course, to know exactly how the author of the Gospel intended it to be read or heard. Like the second reading, it stretches language and our imaginations to the limits. My guess is that it begins in more hushed, maybe even regal tones, and then, by verse 14 takes off into a steady gallop. Explosive language!

So, on these cold winter days, when the days are short and the nights are long, when we’ve heard one Christmas story too many, ten days after Christmas and three days in to the new year, this time when the “demon of the noon day sun” seems to rear its ugly head, maybe we can all use a little bit of wonder, awe, hope, newness, joy, celebration, and gratitude for what God is “up to”.

Let us pray. Rejoice, rejoice, take heart in the night, though dark the winter and cheerless, the rising sun shall crown you with light, be strong and loving and fearless. Love be our song and love our prayer and love our endless story; may God fill every day we share and bring us at last into glory. (*ELW* 242, v. 4)

AMEN.