

The Gift of Belonging
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
January 4, 2009

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14

Well, one more time for good measure: "Happy New Year."

That is what we say to each other in these days after we stop saying the other cover-all phrase of the season, "Happy Holidays." As committed as I am to religious tolerance and understanding, I admit that I did welcome the few times someone went out on a limb and wished me a hearty "Merry Christmas."

I'll also admit that the greeting "Happy New Year" feels a bit inadequate for the job this January. Our world faces its share of challenges in 2009. As a greeting and a wish for others, "Happy New Year" sounds a bit like Popeye before he has eaten his spinach. Having said that, we should keep in mind that Popeye always does find his spinach in time.

This is, of course, also the time for predictions, a favorite pastime of the pundits and the media. Who knows, perhaps someone out there really does care about whether Brittany Spears can continue her comeback or whether the year in fashion really will be as big for feathers, flapper dresses and footwear as the breathless talking heads in New York hope.

As we begin 2009 here at Caldwell, I'm excited about the potential of a different kind of year-long conversation. This church, this congregation, shows a deep passion for serving God through mission. A closely related issue to mission work is the broad topic of social justice or, if you prefer, social witness.

The two go hand in hand. Through our mission ministries, we work to provide immediate and often very tangible aid to those in need. It may be hanging sheetrock in a Habitat House, providing shelter for the homeless through Room in the Inn or meals for the hungry through Loaves and Fishes.

In many ways, those are all efforts to treat the symptoms of larger social illnesses. Through our social justice efforts, however, we have the chance to treat the illnesses themselves. These might include systemic economic, political and social issues that limit how far our city, nation and world can reach toward God's definition of a just world.

Just as we spent time in 2008 targeting our mission work, we will define and pursue what social witness means to us as a congregation here in the 21st century. This congregational conversation can take shape in many ways here – through our Sunday school classes, our public forums and some special learning opportunities that are in the works. I'm sure we can learn a lot.

But there is no better place to start our shared exploration of social justice than scripture itself. Scripture speaks clearly about the duty of the Christian to help those who cannot always adequately help themselves – through the prophets of the Old Testament to the actions of the early church and, most important, the life of Christ,

Today's Old Testament passage from the prophecy of Jeremiah is a great launching point. We shouldn't equate the prophets of the Old Testament and the prognosticators of our day. The prophets were not self-made, free-lance fortune tellers. They were God's spokesmen and women. And it was rarely a job they sought.

Of the Old Testament prophets, the theologian Frederick Buechner wrote:

“There is no evidence to suggest that anyone ever asked a prophet home for supper more than once The prophets were drunk on God and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness no one was ever comfortable

“A prophet's quarrel with the world is deep-down a lover's quarrel. If they didn't love the world, they probably wouldn't bother to tell it that it's going to Hell. They'd just let it go.

A prophet's quarrel, Buechner said, isn't their quarrel at all. It's God's quarrel.

That's certainly true of Jeremiah, who spoke for God in the 7th and 6th centuries before Christ. Next to Isaiah and Moses himself, there were no bigger prophets than Jeremiah. Over 52 chapters, he offers up oracles, sermons, divine messages and other writings that called the people of Jerusalem and Judah away from their own arrogant brand of religious nationalism and back into a right and humble relationship with God.

For this, he lived the life of an outcast, lonely and sensitive, plagued with self doubt, bereft of joy and calling nature, the birds and the animals his only comfort.

If there is one thing we can say about prophets in general, it is that their vision always reaches far, far beyond the grasp of their audience. In Jeremiah's case, he saw not just one step ahead but two. He saw the downfall and exile of God's people at the hands of

the Babylonians. But he also foretold what awaited God's people on the other side of their suffering, namely God's love and grace.

In these verses, Jeremiah paints the picture of a homecoming of sorts, and that seems appropriate for today. As a congregation, we have been scattered over these last weeks and days, traveling, spending time with family and friends as we celebrated Christmas and took a few days off.

Now we are together again. And, perhaps in a sense, we have one more gift to open this season – that is, the gift of belonging, belonging here at Caldwell, belonging to our God and, as this part of the Body of Christ, belonging to each other.

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Today's passage comes from a short section in Jeremiah made up of oracles that's known as the Little Book of Consolations.

Now, I am a child of the era when game shows were about the only thing to watch on TV in the days of summer. For us, our initial knowledge of the idea of consolation was the 'consolidation prize' that the game show runners-up were given. It was usually something like a washer/dryer as compared to the car, the boat or the cruise the big winner took home.

That kind of consolation is NOT what the prophet Jeremiah describes in chapters 30 through 33. No, Jeremiah paints the picture of a divine homecoming, a moment of healing and reconciliation when God gathers God's people up like a shepherd gathers lost sheep.

“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.

“With weeping they will come, and with consolations I will lead the back. I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble” (vv. 8, 9)

Do you hear the inclusion in those verses? Did you hear how God says all will be gathered up, the blind and the lame, those who labor, those with child, those who are weeping? This must have shocked and riled the self-satisfied religious flock of Judah who sought to define the church more narrowly. For them then, and for us today, God

reminds that the church is not fully the church until it welcomes people of every condition and state.

A few years ago, Pastor Jimmy Dorrell and his wife Janet began serving the homeless of Waco, Texas. Because that community was centered under a bridge of Interstate 35, the Dorrells formed what is now known as Church Under the Bridge. Over time, they built a highly unconventional church of about 300 people who gather there for worship each week. It includes bikers and alcoholics, old women with shopping carts holding their possessions as well as more affluent residents who walk over from nearby neighborhoods.

In his book titled Trolls and Truth: 14 Realities About Today's Church that We Don't Want to See, Dorrell challenges the church at large to live into the vision that Jeremiah gives us.

"The reality is that Jesus called us to serve and include the poor and the marginalized not only as objects of our ministries but as brothers and sisters in our congregations," he writes. "The social misfits rejected by the world, should find community, encouragement, and discipleship within the Body of Christ"

In a world full of critics that often rightfully accuse the church of hypocrisy, Dorrell calls the church to reach out to what he affectionately calls the "trolls" of our world.

"These trolls sitting in the pews next to us force us to celebrate a Messiah who touched lepers, sat with a prostitute, ate with a tax collector, and showed us kingdom relationships far beyond homogeneous peers More than cheapened evangelism tools and tracts used frequently by evangelical churches, God uses dynamic Christian fellowships that supersede the culture with a new way of loving and living."¹

Here at Caldwell, God has given us a great head start toward becoming a different kind of church. Each of us has been given the gift of belonging here and we proclaim that "God invites and we welcome, all."

How, we should ask, might God be calling us to pay that gift forward to others who may not feel welcomed by the church?

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¹ Trolls and Truth: 14 Realities About Today's Church that We Don't Want to See, Jimmy Dorrell, chapter 3

At the same time, we cannot overlook that there are many in our midst already who face this new year burdened in their own ways. It may be the reality of a life-changing diagnosis. It may be the loss of loved one or the loss of a job. It may be the trials and tribulations that sometimes come with family.

However great these challenges may appear, Jeremiah's vision of consolation speaks to those who suffer in these ways as well.

“For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.” (v. 11)

Your challenge may be physical, mental or spiritual. It may be financial or familial. It may be old or new. It may be visible or invisible. It may feel as though it has its hands locked around you. But Jeremiah promises that God's redeeming grace and love finally break whatever hands that are too strong for us alone.

“Then,” God promises through Jeremiah, “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.”

In that promise, we are reminded that, before we came to belong to each other here, we belonged to God.

So, on this first Sunday of 2009, we look out over a year of challenges, yes, but also of wonderful possibilities and potential for how we can serve the God to whom we belong. We take our first steps together today encouraged by Jeremiah's bold, two-steps-ahead vision of God's inclusive kingdom.

The greatest encouragement of all, however, is that God would include us in such a kingdom. Because in these last days, God has spoken to us by a son who is the ultimate consolation that whatever state we are in, God will gather us all up and lead us all home.

Amen