

JEREMIAH 31:7-14& JOHN 1:10-18

DARKNESS, DISLOCATION, DANGER, DESPAIR: THESE WORDS SUM UP THE WARNINGS GOD GAVE THROUGH JEREMIAH TO THE UNREPENTANT: GOVERNMENT, RELIGIOUS LEADERS, AND PEOPLE OF JUDAH.

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH AND ITS SISTER BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS CONTAIN VERY LITTLE HAPPY OR POSITIVE NEWS.

BUT TODAY'S READING IS PART OF A LARGE SECTION THAT DOES OFFER HOPE. THIS HOPE IS FOUND IN THE ASSURANCE THAT GOD'S PLAN IS NOT JUST FOR PUNISHMENT, BUT INCLUDES RECONCILIATION.

THIS DOES NOT MEAN THE PROMISED DESTRUCTION AND EXILE WILL NOT HAPPEN, BUT IT DOES SAY IT WILL NOT BE THE FINAL WORD.

IN MANY WAYS AN EXILE HAD ALREADY TAKEN PLACE EVEN BEFORE JERUSALEM SUCCUMBED TO THE MIGHT OF HER ENEMIES.

THIS WAS A SPIRITUAL EXILE CAUSED BY THE POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENTS TURNING FROM GOD AND BRINGING MOST OF GOD'S PEOPLE WITH THEM.

THE WARNING JEREMIAH PRESENTS IS GOD'S MESSAGE THAT A PHYSICAL EXILE FROM THEIR HOMES AND HOMELAND WILL FOLLOW.

HOWEVER, SO THAT PEOPLE MIGHT BE ENCOURAGED TO TURN BACK TO THE LORD AND NOT GIVE UP ON GOD-A LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS OF THE PROPHECY.

THE PROMISE MADE BY GOD IS ONE OF RECONCILIATION IN HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM.

AND COUPLED WITH THAT, GOD WILL ONE DAY BRING HIS EXILED PEOPLE BACK TO THE PROMISED LAND.

IN FACT OTHER NATIONS WILL WITNESS THE JOY OF GOD'S PEOPLE WHEN THEY ARE RETURNED.

THUS THE INSECURITY AND THE LOSS OF IDENTITY AND HOME WILL BE REPLACED BY A RETURN TO SECURITY AND IDENTITY, AS WELL AS HOME.

THIS IS THE PRIMARY MESSAGE OF THE WORDS OF CONSOLATION AND HOPE GOD GAVE TO HIS PROPHET TO DELIVER.

AND YET THERE IS A DEEPER MESSAGE CHRISTIANS CAN FIND IN JEREMIAH'S WORDS. FIRST, JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SHARE OUR EXILE FROM GOD, BY BECOMING HUMAN.

BUT HE ALSO CAME TO GATHER THOSE WHO ARE WILLING TO HIMSELF, AND THUS TO GOD THE FATHER. HE CAN DO SO BECAUSE JESUS BEING FILLED WITH GOD'S GRACE AND TRUTH, WAS WITHOUT SIN.

THIS ENABLES HIM TO NOT ONLY LEAD SINNERS BACK TO GOD, BUT TO GUARANTEE FORGIVENESS AND NEW LIFE.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS WAS THE FIRST STEP GOD TOOK AGAINST THE DARKNESS OF SIN AND HOW IT DRAWS US AWAY FROM GOD.

CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR TOOK ON OUR FLESH, BUT NOT LIKE ONE PUTS ON A COSTUME TO PRETEND.

JESUS WAS ACTUALLY BORN IN A HUMAN BODY-WITH ITS MIND, EMOTIONS, AND EVERYTHING ELSE THAT MAKES ONE HUMAN.

JESUS CAME TO SHOW US THE FATHER'S LOVE, GRACE, AND DESIRE FOR A TRUE AND LASTING RECONCILIATION.

HE IS THE ONE THROUGH WHOM ALL THINGS WERE MADE, AND THE ONE THROUGH WHOM WE CAN BE REMADE.

THINK OF IT THIS WAY- JEREMIAH SPEAKS ABOUT GOD BRINGING HIS EXILED PEOPLE HOME, WHICH IS A POWERFUL PROMISE.

BUT JOHN'S MESSAGE IS THAT GOD, IN CHRIST, CAME TO LIVE AMONG US- LITERALLY "PITCH HIS TENT" WITH US IN THE MIDST OF OUR SPIRITUAL EXILE.

THE GREEK WORD HE USED THAT IS TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH AS "GLORY", IS DRAWN FROM A HEBREW WORD OF THE SAME MEANING.

ONLY THAT HEBREW WORD, "SHEKINAH" WAS SPECIFICALLY USED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT ABOUT GOD'S PRESENCE AND GLORY.

THUS THE MESSAGE JOHN PRESENTS TO THOSE WHO KNOW THE OLD TESTAMENT STORIES IS TO EMPHASIZE JESUS IS THE PRESENCE AND GLORY OF GOD, WHO CAME TO EARTH IN THE FLESH.

AND FOR THOSE OF US WHO CANNOT CLAIM A JEWISH HERITAGE, JESUS DOES EVEN MORE THAN JUST DWELL WITH US.

JESUS MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO RECEIVE THE SAME BENEFITS AS THE CHOSEN PEOPLE, BECAUSE THROUGH JESUS GOD CHOOSES ALL PEOPLE WHO ANSWER HIS CALL TO FAITH.

TODAY WE WILL SING AGAIN "JOY TO THE WORLD". THE HYMN CALLS FOR EARTH TO RECEIVE HER KING, AND EVERY HEART TO PREPARE HIM ROOM.

BUT TO DO SO THE EARTH, AND ESPECIALLY THE PEOPLE ON IT, NEED TO RECOGNIZE THE LIGHT OF GOD'S GLORY IN JESUS, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

AND TO QUOTE SHAKESPEARE- "THERE'S THE RUB", MEANING THE OBSTACLE, THE DIFFICULTY THAT MUST BE OVERCOME.

JOHN PUTS IT THIS WAY: "HE WAS IN THE WORLD, AND THE WORLD CAME INTO BEING THROUGH HIM, YET THE WORLD DID NOT RECOGNIZE HIM."

INDEED, SOMETIMES WE AND OTHERS ARE BLINDED, NOT BY THE LIGHT, BUT TO THE LIGHT.

THIS BLINDNESS TO WHAT IS IN FRONT OF OUR US IS NOT, HOWEVER, A PROBLEM WITH OUR EYES, BUT OUR MIND AND SOUL, OUR PERCEPTION.

HERE ARE A COUPLE OF STORIES THAT ILLUSTRATE THE POINT.

THE FIRST TAKES PLACE DURING HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN ERA. ONE DAY CARY GRANT WAS WALKING ALONG AND WAS SEEN BY A MAN WHO SEEMED TO RECOGNIZE HIM.

HE STOPPED THE ACTOR, SAYING. "WAIT, I KNOW YOU. YOU'RE-NO DON'T TELL ME- I KNOW. YOU'RE ROCK HUDSON, NO THAT'S NOT RIGHT."

CARY GRANT TOLD THE MAN WHO HE WAS, BUT STILL CAUGHT UP IN HIS OWN THOUGHTS HE WOULD NOT LISTEN, BUT CONTINUED TO INSIST HE COULD COME UP WITH THE RIGHT NAME.

NOTICE HE WAS SO VERY CONFIDENT HE KNEW THIS FAMOUS MAN, STANDING IN FRONT OF HIM HE WOULD NOT LISTEN TO THE TRUTH.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF BLINDNESS IS ONE OF ATTITUDE AND MISSED OPPORTUNITY.

IT IS A STORY ABOUT JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER WHO WAS VISITING A POPULAR EAST COAST VACATION AREA.

WHILE THERE HE SAW A NOTICE ABOUT A PUBLIC MEETING TO DISCUSS HOW TO SAVE A STRUGGLING RESORT.

HE DECIDED TO ATTEND THE MEETING. WHEN HE ENTERED NO ONE RECOGNIZED HIM AND HE DID NOT INTRODUCE HIMSELF.

AFTER LISTENING A WHILE, HE TRIED TO OFFER A FEW SUGGESTIONS, BUT HE WAS IGNORED BY THOSE LEADING THE MEETING.

SEEING THEY WERE NOT INTERESTED IN WHAT HE HAD TO SAY ROCKEFELLER LEFT, WHILE THE MEETING CONTINUED.

SOMEONE, KNOWN BY THE LEADERS, PASSED INTO THE ROOM, WHILE HE WAS GOING OUT.

THE MAN EXCITEDLY SPOKE UP, ASKING THEM WHAT HE WANTED.

THE OTHERS WERE CONFUSED, THEY DID NOT KNOW WHAT THEIR COLLOQUE MEANT. HE EXPLAINED-THAT MAN WHO JUST LEFT WAS JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER.

THUS THE RESORT AND COMMUNITY LEADERS MISSED A GREAT OPPORTUNITY. WHO KNOWS WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF ROCKEFELLER HAD DECIDED TO LEND HIS SUPPORT.

INSTEAD, SENSING THE OTHERS WERE NOT INTERESTED IN LISTENING TO OUTSIDE IDEAS HE WALKED AWAY.

THE PROBLEM, THE TRAGIC FACT ABOUT THE HUMAN RACE IS THAT SO VERY OFTEN WE HAVE NOT LISTENED WHEN GOD SPEAKS TO US.

THINK ABOUT IT- GOD SPEAKS TO US IN THE WONDER AND BEAUTY OF CREATION, IN THE WORDS OF SCRIPTURE, IN HIS INCARNATION IN JESUS.

YET EVEN WHEN WE HEAR, WE DO NOT ALWAYS PAY ATTENTION, OR OBEY.

SOMETHING SIMILAR IS THE CASE WHEN IT COMES OUR PERCEPTION.

SO MANY FAIL TO KNOW JESUS, THAT IS- TO RECOGNIZE GOD IN HIS PRESENCE, OR TO RECEIVE JESUS IF THEY DO.

I AM NOT JUST TALKING ABOUT THOSE WHO SAW HIM PHYSICALLY BACK THEN NOT KNOWING HIM, BUT ALSO SPIRITUALLY,NOW.

AN IMAGE OF NOT RECEIVING JESUS CAN BE FOUND BY REFLECTING ON THE FAMOUS PAINTING OF HIM KNOCKING ON THE DOOR.

SOME PEOPLE NEVER OPEN IT, AND OTHERS WHO OPEN IT STILL DO NOT LET JESUS COME INSIDE.

THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO NOT RECOGNIZE OR RECEIVE THE SAVIOR.

BUT WE OUGHT NOT TO LIMIT THIS IMAGERY ONLY TO SALVATION, SINCE IT CAN BE APPLIED IN VARIOUS WAYS EVEN TO THOSE WHO ARE ALREADY SAVED BY CHRIST.

CHRISTIANS, FALL SHORT FROM TIME TO TIME WHEN IT COMES TO PERCEIVING AND WELCOMING JESUS.

SOMETIMES THIS HAPPENS WHEN WE FALL INTO TEMPTATION.

OTHER TIMES WE BECOME SO DISTRACTED BY THE WAYS OF THE WORLD, BY STRUGGLES, AND EVEN BY HAPPINESS THAT WE DO NOT PAY ATTENTION TO, OR DO NOT RESPOND TO THE LORD.

WHEN THIS HAPPENS WE MAY NEVER KNOW WHAT OPPORTUNITIES MIGHT HAVE BEEN MISSED.

SOMETIMES THE OPPORTUNITIES MAY BE FOR OUR BENEFIT, BUT OTHER TIMES IT MAY BE THAT WE'VE MISSED A CHANCE TO HELP OTHERS

BUT THERE IS GOOD NEWS FOR US EVEN WHEN WE FAIL, AND THAT IS THE GRACE UPON GRACE OF GOD JESUS BRINGS TO US.

THIS GRACE OPENS THE WAY FOR OUR FORGIVENESS, RECONCILIATION, AND RENEWAL.

THE EPIPHANY HYMN, "WE THREE KINGS", HAS A VERSE THAT DESCRIBES THE GIFT OF JESUS.

"GLORIOUS NOW, BEHOLD HIM ARISE, KING AND GOD AND SACRIFICE; ALLELUIA, SOUNDS THROUGH THE EARTH AND SKIES."

THIS WAS THE PURPOSE OF THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST,
WHY HE CAME TO DWELL AMONG US AS AN ACTUAL HUMAN
BEING.

FURTHERMORE, HIS SACRIFICE IS HOW CHRIST SHOWED
GOD'S SHEKINAH, HIS GLORY AND PRESENCE IN A WAY THAT
WAS EQUALED ONLY BY HIS RESURRECTION.

SO LET US ALSO TAKE A MOMENT OR TWO TO REFLECT ON
THE LIGHT OF THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM, WHICH DREW THE
MAGI TO JESUS.

ITS LIGHT WAS POWERFUL INDEED, YET IT WAS STILL A
SMALL REFLECTION OF THE GREAT LIGHT- JESUS WHO HAD
COME INTO THE WORLD, WHICH HE HAD CREATED.

WHEN WE ALLOW CHRIST'S GLORY- HIS PRESENCE AND LIGHT
TO SHINE THROUGH US, WE TOO BECOME SMALLER
REFLECTIONS OF HIM.

SO LET US THINK ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, EVEN
AFTER WE VENTURE OUT OF THE CHURCH BUILDING TODAY.

LET US PRAY:

GOD OF MAJESTY AND LIGHT, YOU HOLD THE WORLD IN
YOUR HAND. WE PRAISE YOU, FOR IN JESUS CHRIST ALL
PEOPLE MAY SEE YOUR GLORY.

HELP US TO OPEN OUR EYES, HEARTS, AND MINDS TO
RECOGNIZE AND RECEIVE JESUS EACH TIME HE CALLS TO US.
AND BY YOUR SPIRIT MAY WE BE FILLED WITH HIS PEACE.

INSPIRE US AND SUSTAIN US TO BE FAITHFUL IN OUR SERVICE
IN CHRIST NAME, SO OTHERS BY SEE AND WELCOME HIS
LIGHT.

WE PRAY THIS NOT ONLY FOR OURSELVES, BUT ALSO FOR
CHRISTIANS IN EVERY NATION AND PLACE IN THE WORLD.

IN THE NAME OF OUR SAVIOR WE GIVE YOU THANKS AND
PRAISE. AMEN

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