

Advent 2017 – The Joy and Sorrow of Jesus' Birth "The Certain Comfort"

Text: Jeremiah 31:15-17

For a third time we make our trip back in time this evening in an attempt to gain a new appreciation and perspective of the coming of our Lord Jesus. Take yourself in spirit back through time to our quiet, pastoral place of wood and stone and sheep. This is your world. You are in Bethlehem, a short time after the birth of Jesus Christ, the very Son of God.

For a brief, shining moment, after the dawn touches your eyes, all is well in the world in which you live, and all is at peace in your heart. You live once again in a world of "sameness" where all your children are healthy and vigorous and you welcome the labors that lay before you. Then, with a rush, the memory, the reality, came flooding back into your heart. Like an upper millstone, the vision of your slain son presses down upon your very soul, filling you with a crippling sorrow and instantly draining from the very depth of your being every last bit of enthusiasm about the future.

You recall, in crushing reality, how Herod's soldiers swept through your tiny village and left in their wake a world of numbing sadness, crippling sorrow. The joy of so many families had so quickly been turned to grief and despair, and you wonder again if the scars will ever fully heal. So many questions remain. There was little doubt why the barbarian Herod had ordered the death of the helpless baby boys. He was a man possessed only with himself. A man whose cruelty was matched only by his fear and selfishness.

The inactivity of the city this morning reminds you that it is the Sabbath. Seeking comfort of any kind, you force yourself to dress, and it takes every bit of energy that you can muster to walk to the tiny synagogue where the Scriptures would be read. Perhaps the man of God will be able to offer some answers, some bit of hope or comfort. The reading for this Sabbath startles some, not others. It is from the Prophet Jeremiah, the 31st Chapter. It is with a mixture of bitterness and anger that you begin to listen to the words spoken in the synagogue on this morning. This is what you hear from that man of God:

"Our reading this fateful morning is from the scroll of the Prophet Jeremiah, the 31st Chapter, the Fifteenth Verse:

ESV Jeremiah 31:15-17 *Thus says the LORD: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD: "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷ There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country.*

*"Beloved sons of Abraham, descendants of the Patriarch Joseph and his son Ephraim. These words, spoken so long ago by the Prophet Jeremiah, foretold the terrible tragedy that has so recently been fulfilled in our tiny community. Nothing could prepare us – you – for the events that have come to pass in our midst. Each one of you is Rachel. Each one of you weeps on this day for his or her child. Each one of you, on this day, **"refuses to be comforted for your children, because they are no more."** No words that I can speak can ever bring them back to you, for the prophecy was in all ways fulfilled. Your dear children **"are no more."** I realize full well that no one has to tell you this, for you have seen the horror with your own eyes.*

What I desire to bring to your attention on this dark day is that for so many years we thought that the words had been referring to others, never to us. We thought that the descendants of Rachel had already cried the tears of this prophecy. We believed that the words referred to the great sorrow of our ancestors when so many were slain or carried off into exile in Babylon. Recall, if you can, the cold indifference with which we used to read these words, imagining that they referred to others long since dead and gone. Now we know differently. These words serve as a description of this terrible day, this tragic hour.

Think back, if you are able, to your feelings about these words when you thought that they addressed the anguish and suffering of others. We heard them then with a detached indifference, or at best with a strained sympathy. How different they sound now. Like well-aimed arrows, the words have now found their marks in our hearts, and there the arrows are still lodged. Who among us does not feel the pain? Who does not feel as though these arrows have opened holes in our very spirits that can never be mended; holes from which our very lifeblood now flows in a steady, unstanachable stream?

Though we certainly lacked the depth of sympathy we should have felt when we thought that these words were written to others, I entreat you now to think back to that time. Remember how it was in your mind that you were able to distance yourself from them, how you were able to remain somewhat detached from the terrible sorrow that these words addressed. Do you remember? Was it not, at least in part, because of the hopeful, promising words that followed the tragic prediction? Listen to them again: **"Thus says the LORD: 'Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷ There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country.'"**

Think back. Struggle to remember. Were we not able to keep the sorrow of these words at bay because of the promise that followed them? For centuries we believed that these words had already been fulfilled in every way. Rachel's descendants, along with the rest of Judah, had been carried off into exile, but the Lord's promise of a brighter future formed the seed that we knew would one day grow into a mighty oak of comfort for those who suffered so terribly. These thoughts enabled us to detach ourselves from the sorrow of the tragedy.

Dear Fellow Members of God's chosen people, just as this horrible prophecy was written to describe this awful day, so also were the words of comfort meant by our God for you and me. Listen for now a third time to the words of the Prophet, the words of our God, but hear them this time as written not for others but for you: **"Thus says the LORD: 'Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷ There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country.'"**

These words no doubt gave comfort to our ancestors at the time of the great Babylonian exile, but they were written also to you. What do they mean to you? Shall the lives of your children be miraculously restored by as by Elijah in the days of old? Sadly, no, we have no right to expect such a miracle. This **"coming back"** of our children will not happen in this life. Our children have passed from this life to the next. As David once said long ago at the death of his infant son: **"While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' ²³ But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."** (2 Samuel 12:22-23)

Our hope, like that of David before us, does not lie in the return of our children, who have died; our hope lies in that one Child who escaped.

Many of us wondered at the time why his parents carried him off so unexpectedly in the night. Now we know the reason. Many have felt resentment. If they knew, why didn't Joseph and Mary warn others? The fact is they did not know. They knew only that their child, the Child, was in danger, and therefore they fled. The blame lies not with Joseph and Mary, and certainly not with the Baby King. Nor does the blame lie with God. The blame, as always, lies with sinful man – in this case, with the loathsome Herod and the devil that he serves.

It is, as we have said, with the Child Jesus that our hope must now and always lie. In fact is not his sudden departure further evidence that God himself is with him, preserving and protecting him as his own dear Son? Not that we needed further evidence, for the announcement of his royal birth by angels and by the miraculous star is evidence enough. There can be no doubt that the Messiah has been born in our humble city, as long ago foretold by the Prophet Micah, **"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting."**

If this then is in fact the Prince of Peace, the Coming One, then too we dare never forget what he has come to accomplish. Isaiah has laid it out for us: **"We was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."** (Isaiah 53:3-6)

Although it may seem impossible to comprehend for you at this moment, the problem that this Child King was sent to address is far more critical than even the physical death of our beloved children. This Jesus has been sent to save both us and our children from the death that does not end. Did not the angel say to Joseph even before this Child was born, **"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the**

Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins"? (Matthew 1:20-21)

*Here is where our comfort is to be found. Here is how and why, even now, we can rejoice and give thanks to God. Those who die in faith can look forward to a reunion one blessed day, for this is what the Child King was sent to accomplish for us. Is this not what Jeremiah was saying in our text when he said, **"There is hope in your future, says the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country"?** Therefore comfort one another with the expectation of the glorious reunion that the Baby King came to earn for us."*

With that the service ends, and again we are carried forward in time over 2000 years, and we stand once again in the present. As the Jews no doubt once read the prophecies of old as applying only to others (past or future) so let us now recognize that we have done the very same thing in our own hearts and minds. This is not right, for the Holy Spirit himself has told us in 1 Corinthians 10:11-12, **"Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."**

What are we then to learn from these words? What are we to learn from the slaughter of the baby boys in Bethlehem? We are to be reminded of the terrible nature of sin and its consequences. We are to be forewarned and fully prepared for the inevitable hardship that our Lord has warned us to expect as his beloved children. We are to be reminded of the price that Jesus Christ had to pay to make us his children, and to rescue us from the curse that we have all earned because of our sins. Finally, we are to be reminded that, come good times or bad, Jesus *has accomplished* what he set out to do. He came to pay the debt of our sin. This he has done. He came to reconcile us to God the Father. This he has done. He came to give us eternal life. This we now have. Learn from all of these events to give thanks and rejoice, in good times and in bad, for your salvation has been won by Jesus the Lamb. It is *His* birth that we prepare to celebrate. May the certainty of promises kept in the past assure you of the comfort that will one day be yours. Amen.

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Midweek Advent Services – 2017

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn - 60

Liturgy – A Service of the Word (*Supplement page 22*)

The Scripture Reading for the Day

(November 29) John 7:37-47 On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" ³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. ⁴⁰ ¶ When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." ⁴¹ Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?" ⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" ⁴³ So there was a division among the people over him. ⁴⁴ Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. ⁴⁵ ¶ The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" ⁴⁶ The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" ⁴⁷ The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived?"

(December 6) 1 Peter 4:12-19 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

(December 13) John 3:14-21 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ ¶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

The Confession of Faith – (The Christmas Creed)

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Who sent His Son to be my Savior;*

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, my Lord, the long-promised Messiah, Who came as foretold, being conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, announced by the angels, worshipped by the shepherds, adored by the Wise Men, Who lived to suffer, die, and rise again, To free me from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil;

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, Who has brought me to faith in my Savior, And by whose continuous work in my heart, I rejoice in my salvation, Walk in Christ, Show forth His praises, And will one day live and reign with Him in all eternity. Amen.

The Pre-Sermon Hymn - 130 (1, 5-6)

The Sermon Theme – "The Joy and Sorrow of Jesus' Birth"

Nov 29: His arrival is sudden, though expected (*Isaiah 40:1-5*)

Dec. 6: His arrival brings sorrow, which is unexpected (*Matthew 2:13-18*)

Dec. 13: His arrival brings comfort, which is certain (*Jeremiah 31:15-17*)

The Offertory – [Sung by All]

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation; and uphold me with Thy free spirit.
Amen.

The Post Sermon Hymn – 58 (1, 5-7)

The Collect for Peace

Pastor: *The Lord will bless His people.*

Congregation: *The Lord will bless His people with peace.*

Pastor: Lord God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed, give unto Your servants that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be prepared to obey Your commandments, and also that we, being defended by You from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in peace and quietness. This we ask through the merits of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Savior, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

Congregation: *Amen.*

The Prayers of the Day

The Lord's Prayer

The Benediction *(Spoken by the Pastor)*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Congregation: *(Sung)* Amen.

The Closing Hymn – 375 (1-2, 5)

Silent Prayer

Sermon Texts:

^{ESV} **Isaiah 40:1-5** Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

^{ESV} **Matthew 2:13-18** Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." ¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:15-17** Thus says the LORD: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD: "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷ There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country."

- Please return this bulletin to the Entry Table to be used next week -

Advent 2017



The joy and sorrow of Jesus' birth

- The expected surprise
- The unexpected sorrow
- The certain comfort

St Paul Lutheran Church
Bismarck, ND