

Rev. Dan Welch Christmas 2 1-2-22 Text- Jeremiah 31: 10- 13

The prophet Jeremiah speaks wonderful words of comfort, joy, and hope to a group of people who were in a heap of trouble. He talks about dancing and rejoicing, gladness, and singing. Crops and herds will be plentiful-food and drink galore. Their life will be like a watered garden. Sounds like paradise. The people will be gathered ***together*** instead of scattered all over the place. No more sorrow or grief. The Lord will redeem them from a hand too strong for them.

But when Jeremiah spoke those wonderful words, the hand that was too strong for those ancient people was squeezing the life right out of them. The northern half of the nation, Israel, had already been conquered, and the people were scattered all over the place, if they weren't already dead. The southern half, Judah, was rapidly headed to the same fate. Babylon was on the move, and this was an enemy too strong for Judah to fight. Their only hope was that the people would repent, turn from their sin and rebellion against God, and then He would keep them intact, safe, from this strong enemy power.

But the sin and rebellion that had led the people away from God was also strong, too strong for the people. They had lived in it for so long they couldn't break free. Their fate was sealed. Babylon would come. Jerusalem would be destroyed, the leaders killed, people exiled. These people were in a heap of trouble. Yet Jeremiah still speaks words of comfort, joy, and hope.

Isn't it great that as we start of this brand-new year of 2022 A.D. that we're not in the same predicament that those people were? There are no serious thoughts of any foreign nation conquering the United States.

With that being said and without a single doubt, to say it has been a challenging couple years for our country would be a huge understatement! Covid, being the top concern. What with the illness and death it has wreaked, and along with that the negative impact it has had on society in general, with isolation, job loss, and even family conflicts resulting. Could it be that kind of like ancient Israel and Judah, there are stronger hands in **our** lives that put **us** in a heap of trouble? Yes, there

are. We're in trouble too. Stronger hands are trying to squeeze the life out of us.

And many people today are afraid. Afraid not just of future outbreaks of Covid, but the recent uptick in violence in our cities is spreading to the suburbs and beyond. You can add to that the record high national debt, along with rapid inflation, and it appears that a hand stronger than we are is at work in this land. Some days you look around and say, "We're in a heap of trouble here."

But what was the deep, underlying problem for ancient Israel and Judah? ***Sin and rebellion***. The same is true for us. The stronger hand that creates so much trouble for us is not just out there, but also in here (point to heart), our own sinfulness. It's been nearly three thousand years since Jeremiah spoke those words, but not much has changed. We're still struggling with the same problems that sin and rebellion bring. We still know sadness, grief, tears, hurt, and death that the ancient Israelites knew all too well. You're no stranger to these things and neither am I.

If you're like me, during this Christmas holiday you took some time to remember loved ones you used to celebrate Christmas with, but now are no longer with us. That loss - at least a loss for now - can be hard to take. Whether those family members or friends died recently or long ago, the devastating hand of death was at work, claiming our loved ones and leaving behind broken hearts.

What's more, the list of dear members in our Church bulletin that we've been praying for has been quite lengthy lately, too. Maybe there's someone in your family who's been struggling with a physical ailment or an emotional strain.

It's been almost three thousand years since Jeremiah's day, but the sadness, pain, grief, and death that sin's strong hands bring are still here. We're still in a heap of trouble. Aging, sickness, and death are powerful adversaries to all of us. We still need Jeremiah's words of comfort, joy, and hope.

But do these words come true? For ancient Judah, after seventy years of exile, they *did* return to Jerusalem. They did get their country

back. But that national rejoicing was just a peek at the greater comfort, joy, and hope that God would give. Later in chapter 31 Jeremiah says that God will establish a new covenant with His people, a covenant where He will take care of those strong hands of sin and rebellion. God promises to forgive our iniquity and remember our sin no more.

About seven hundred years later, God kept that promise. Comfort, joy, and hope were born in a little town called Bethlehem. Just nine short days ago we celebrated Christmas. Go back once again to that manger scene. The baby Jesus held in His mother's arms. Can you picture Him reaching out His tiny hand, maybe wrapping His little fingers around the tip of Mary's index finger? It hardly seemed possible at the time, but His infant hand would become the stronger hand that would bring us comfort, joy, and hope.

Picture Jesus twelve years later. He's in Jerusalem with His parents. **They** start to head home, but **He** stays. Where do Mary and Joseph find Him? In the temple. His hands were already busy doing His

Father's work. Not Joseph's carpentry, but God's work of bringing us comfort, hope, and joy.

Now jump ahead some eighteen years, and Jesus is about thirty years old. His hands are that of a full-grown man. His ministry begins. His hands cast out demons. He is stronger than Satan and that demonic realm. The disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee. A vicious storm comes up. They cry for help. Jesus tells the wind and waves to "Be still!" Immediately, all is calm. Jesus is stronger than creation gone haywire. A leper is alone, his body sick with disease, death in the near future; yet Jesus reaches out with His compassionate hand and touches him. The leper is healed just like that. Jesus' hands are stronger than any illness sin could bring to our lives.

But the greatest enemy still needed to be defeated. The greatest enemy is death. When death's hand squeezes, we are helpless. And so it appeared with Jesus. His hands are nailed to the cross. His hands die; go limp when Jesus takes His last breath. His hands are lifeless in the tomb. Is death's hand stronger?

No! The cross is where God's promise in Jeremiah comes true. Jesus takes care of the sin and rebellion that are too strong for us to handle. With His hands outstretched in love for us, He brings forgiveness. The new covenant is given to us. God forgives our iniquity. He remembers our sin no more. We need Jesus' stronger hands on the cross, for there He redeems us from the strong hand of sin.

And more. Jesus' hands are stronger even than *death*. On Easter morning, Jesus' hands come to *life* again. He shows them to Thomas and the other disciples. The nail marks are still there, but the death they brought is replaced by life and immortality. His resurrection, the empty tomb, is God keeping Jeremiah's promise of comfort, joy, and hope for His people.

Yes, Jeremiah's words come true. People who have been scattered are brought together. Not in a nation with boundaries like the United States, but into a kingdom that reaches around the globe. The risen Jesus brings us together into His church, the community of believers. We may be separated by time and space, by great distances and centuries, but we

are still united around Jesus. We are never truly alone. We are His people and look forward to that day when we will all be together around Jesus in heaven in joyous hymns of praise. Talk about dancing and rejoicing!

But, of course, the grief and sorrow are still with us. As long as we live in this world, our bodies will still experience illness and pain, friends and family members will still die, and sickness will invade those we care about. How does Jesus' stronger hand turn those times of sadness into comfort, joy, and hope?

To answer that, look to where Jesus has promised to put His hands to work for us in our lives today. His Word and Sacraments. In Baptism, working through the hands of His pastors, Jesus brings us into His family. Right then and there, in Baptism Jeremiah's words come true for us as Jesus scoops us up in His hands and gives us His victory over sin, death, and all those strong hands we can do nothing about. In Holy Communion the Lord Jesus - again working through His servants - delivers to you His very body and blood with the bread and wine for the forgiveness of your sins and to keep you strong in your faith in Him. In

Holy Absolution, the forgiveness of all of your sins is delivered to you personally by the Lord once again through His instrument, the pastor. In all these ways Jesus' strong hands are definitely at work for us today to keep us safe from all the powers of our enemy, the Evil One.

Even when we are frightened, sad, grieving, Jesus is still the stronger hand. Jeremiah gave the people back then a glimpse of that joyous hope. We've seen that comfort and joy with tiny fingers as a baby in Bethlehem, to a young boy's hands about His Father's business in the temple, to His outstretched hands of forgiveness nailed to a cross, to His living and resurrected hands welcoming us into eternal life. And now, today, we once again sing and rejoice that Jesus is our comfort, joy, and hope, even when we are in a heap of trouble. The Lord is the One Who redeems us from hands too strong for us. No doubt about it, we need a stronger hand, and His name is Jesus! Amen.