

Hope

As the long, six-month season of Pentecost begins to wind down, our Sunday Bible readings from the lectionary will turn more and more toward the end times, the return of Christ, and the kingdom of God – which is why the last Sunday after Pentecost is often called Christ the King Sunday. That theme is then picked up at the beginning of Advent for a week or two before thoughts turn to the first coming of Jesus at his birth. But in spite of the fact that some stores already have Christmas decorations out, it's only the fourteenth week after Pentecost. We have another ten weeks to go until Advent. Yet this morning we already hear a dark and fearful passage from Jeremiah, speaking of stupid children, the earth waste and void, and the land a desert. What's going on? Where's the hope?

If you know the background of Jeremiah, you'll have an idea of why he sounds so bleak. He lived in a time when the future of his country, Judah, was in serious doubt. Leadership was weak and vacillating. The Babylonians were constantly threatening it. Eventually they would overrun it, raze the Temple to the ground, and carry many of the people off to exile. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been destroyed some years before.

The big question for Jeremiah and his people was, why would God allow this to happen? Weren't they God's chosen people, whom God led out of slavery in Egypt? Jeremiah had a very specific answer that few wanted to hear; they weren't being faithful to God. "They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good," he said. Psalm 14 has a similar sentiment when it says, "Every one has proved faithless; all alike have turned bad; there is none who does good; no, not one."

The future for Jeremiah looked bleak. Even in the midst of this darkness, however, there was still a glimmer of hope. God still called them "my people." He promised that he will not make a full end. The exile will come – but someday there will also be a return from exile. And for us as Christians, we know that as the story continues, one future night in Bethlehem a baby will be born that will give the whole world hope.

How the hope of Jesus Christ played out in one person's life is summarized in the letter to Timothy, one of St. Paul's protégés. Paul began as a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence in his efforts to destroy the nascent Christian faith. Yet even such a great sinner as Paul received mercy. Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners. Paul used his life as an example to others, so that no one might think that they were beyond the redeeming work of Christ. God always, *always*, seeks the lost.

In the Gospel we heard two stories of how much joy there is when the lost is found. There are actually three parables of lostness: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son – what we usually call the prodigal son. We heard that parable on the fourth Sunday of Lent, so it is omitted today. The point of all three "lost" parables is that God continually seeks us in even the most hopeless situations. And when we return to God, there is incredible joy, joy that even extends to the angels in heaven!

No matter what has happened to our lives during the week, on Sunday Jesus offers hope, in God's Word, in the words and rituals of our liturgy, and in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Today we will have another source of hope through another sacramental rite from our biblical tradition: the anointing and laying on of hands for healing, often called unction. Through this God's grace is given for the healing of spirit, mind, and body, as our prayer book catechism teaches us. Today we will also have a special Litany of Healing, so that the whole Trinity community can support and pray for those who choose to come forward for healing. It is one more way that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are present here at Trinity.

The bleakness of Jeremiah and the exile of Judah are not the end of the story. Nor is the birth of Jesus, the conversion of Paul, or the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin. God still seeks those who are lost and desires their reconciliation. The story continues through you and through me and through the lives that we live. God is asking that *we* be the ones who share the love of Jesus Christ with one another and take the healing power of the Holy Spirit into the world. It all begins here, today, in this place. Thanks be to God for this gift given to us. To this Holy God, the source of all our life and love, immortal, invisible, be honor and glory forever and ever.

[Pentecost 14: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10.]