

“We Are Family!”

A sermon by The Rev. Dr. Douglas E. Nagel

Sunday, January 3, 2021

Text: Jeremiah 31:7-14, Ephesians 1:3-14 and Ken 1:10-18

Jeremiah 31:7-14

For thus says the LORD:

*Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
‘Save, O LORD, your people,
the remnant of Israel.’*

*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 shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.*

*Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands far away;
say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.’
For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall become like a watered garden,
and they shall never languish again.*

*Then 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.
I will give the priests their fill of fatness,
and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.*

Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom

and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

John 1:10-18

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (Ken testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

There are years that are special. The year 1979 was one of those years for me. We were one year into our marriage. I graduated from Princeton Seminary in May. I was ordained by Shenango Presbytery on July 8, 1979 into the Gospel ministry at Third United Presbyterian Church in New Castle, my home church. In July, I began my first call in Cumberland, Maryland and in October, the Pittsburgh Pirates won the World Series by beating the Baltimore Orioles.

The theme song for the Pirates that year was "We Are Family." Because of the title of today's sermon, I thought seriously about performing a rendition of the Pointer Sisters' hit, "We Are Family." The possibility of totally mortifying my wife and embarrassing myself, allowed discretion to become the better part of valor.

Instead, I would like to tell you about a woman by the name of Barbara. It's another family story. Barbara called the church office in one of the parishes I previously served. She asked for an appointment to come in and speak with me. I dread those calls. I really do.

As a pastor, I never know the exact agenda when someone calls and asks for an appointment. I never know whether a personal problem is motivating them to seek counseling or whether they have a complaint and want to "shoot me." There are just too many unknowns.

Barbara asked for the appointment and I did as I always do. I granted her request and gave her the appointment. She came in at the appointed time and sat down on the couch across the room in my office. She began by saying, "Pastor, you know that Ken and I have, for a number of years, tried to have children. We have tried and tried, but because of a medical condition I have, we are unable to have children. I would like you to keep your ears open. If you know of anyone in the congregation or community who is aware of a pregnant young girl who wants to give her child up for adoption, we would be very interested in adopting that child."

I prayed with Barbara and I assured her that I would continue to pray for her. Barbara and Ken had a few near misses...children they thought they were going to be able to adopt. At the last minute, things didn't work out, and the possibility vanished. One day, I got a phone call. Barbara said, "The adoption is going to go through. We have a son. He is almost two years old and we are so excited."

I was excited for them. I got to baptize Dennis. I also got to baptize his sister, Annie, when she was adopted. On the day I performed Dennis's baptism, I chose a different approach instead of preaching on baptism. I preached on adoption. Adoption or election is a big part of the Presbyterian doctrine. Adoption and election present the idea that God chooses us and elects us for salvation.

In the first scripture lesson read today, Jeremiah 31:7-14, we are confronted with a very interesting passage. This is one of the only texts, in fact I believe it is the first text in the Old Testament that mentions God as Father. Notice that it says that God is going to redeem Israel.

First, we must look at the context of this passage. Israel has gone into exile in Babylon. They have been conquered; first, the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 BC, and then in 586 BC, the Babylonians come in and conquer Judah, the Southern Kingdom. The Babylonians take all the important people with them to Babylon, about 700 miles away. They take the king and his family. They take all the administrators. They take all the professional people. They move all these people to Babylon, and they leave the poor people behind, putting a governor over them.

The people of God are in exile for all most 70 years. Then, Jeremiah begins to speak the word of the Lord, a prophecy of hope that God is going to do something... that God is going to redeem Israel, bring back this remnant. As you read this passage it is interesting to discover the people that God is going to redeem. Hear what Jeremiah says. "I will bring them from the land of the North and gather them from the ends of the Earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, the expectant mothers and women in labor."

These are not the important people. These are not the powerful people. Instead, these are the marginalized people. These are the people everybody else usually forgets about. These are the people that aren't important on anybody's scale of things. Jeremiah says, "And they will come with weeping and they will pray as I bring them back. And I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's Father and Ephraim is my first-born son."

The verbal imagery Jeremiah uses is vivid. It is almost that of a father taking the hand of a child and leading the child along the way of redemption, the way home. It is also reminiscent of the 23rd Psalm... streams of water and level paths. God is going to accomplish this. God is going to bring this about in an incredibly special way for Israel and ultimately for the whole world.

During this season, the season of Epiphany, which begins this Wednesday, we celebrate the fact that the light of the world has come and is made known to all the nations of the world. The Magi, the Gentile seers and wise ones come, and worship this King of the Jews. They bring their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

God brings about this redemption, this saving work, through a certain means. We have a theological term for this means. It is the term Incarnation.

Back in the early 1940's representatives from all the different religions of the world convened at a major conference in Chicago. All these representatives met together... the Buddhists, the Hindus, the Christians, the Jews, Muslims, and others. The Christian representatives gathered in a corner. They began to discuss what it was that made Christianity unique and distinctive... what there was about Christianity that was different from all the other religions of the world. One of the participants in the debate said, "Well, the thing that make Christianity distinctive is that God walked among men." Someone else replied, "No, that won't work. There are many religions that have a record in their writings of God walking among men.

Someone else said, "Then it's the resurrection! It's the Easter story. It's that God raised Jesus from the dead." Someone else said, "Well, no. That's not quite true because there is the legend of Mithra and the stories of Isis and Osiris. The group became frustrated. The debate became increasingly heated and rancorous. Into the room walked someone of whom you have probably heard. This man, Clive Staples Lewis, otherwise known as C.S. Lewis, entered the room in his tweed jacket smoking his pipe. He sat down and for a few moments listened to the heated debate. He asked, "What is all this about?"

The participants in the debate began to explain the situation to him. They said they were trying to express what it is that is distinctive and unique about Christianity. Lewis thought for a moment and then spoke, "Well," he said, "what conclusions have you reached?"

They replied, "We thought it was that God walked among men. Lewis agreed with those who said, "No, that's not it." The participants said, "Then we thought it was the resurrection." "No, that's not it either."

Lewis said, "You are all partially right. It is easy. It's not merely that God walked among men. It is that God became a man...that God took on human flesh in Jesus Christ. That is the uniqueness of the Christian faith...that Jesus in his life and in his ministry fully bore witness to the God who was revealed in him. Jesus then went to the cross willingly to bear the sins of humankind. You will find that in no other religion." When we talk about the Incarnation, we speak about the means by which God reveals God's self to us and enabled us to become children of God. In John chapter 1, the passage that was read this morning, John writes: *"He (Jesus) was in the world and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to his own his own people (the Jews), but his own people didn't receive Him. Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right (exousia, in the Greek) [or the authority] to become children of God, born not of natural descent nor of human decision or of the husband's will but born of God."*

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, and Lutheran pastor, allegorized the story of the Incarnation. He did this to explain how it is and why it is that God would take on human flesh in Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard tells the story of a prince who wants to marry a princess. He wants to share his kingdom with someone. His father, the king, brings all manner of princesses from other kingdoms for his son to meet and court. None of them is satisfactory.

One day, the prince goes off to look for a princess on his own. As he is going through a peasant village one day, he happens to see a beautiful maiden girl. He is immediately smitten by her beauty and charm. He finds himself suddenly in love with this peasant maid. He cannot get her out of his mind. He has never seen her before, but he has not encountered her like anywhere.

The prince returns to the palace. He thinks, "How can I win this woman and ask her to be my bride...ask her to be my wife...ask her to be eventually be my queen." The prince thinks, "If I bring her to the palace and shower her with gifts, jewels and furs and offer her the crown, of course she will say "yes." What woman wouldn't jump at the chance to be the Queen? But would she want to be a queen merely because of who I am and what I possess? Or would she want to be queen because she really loves me?"

The prince makes a decision. Instead of inviting the peasant girl to the palace to make her queen, he goes into the peasant village himself. However, he doesn't go as the prince. He divests himself of his robes, his crown, and his scepter. He goes in the form of a peasant, donning the peasant garb and the peasant shoes. He goes into the village and takes a job where he works alongside the peasant girl until she begins to fall in love with him for who he is. Only after he has won her heart does he reveal who, indeed, it is who has courted her and has sought her hand.

Kierkegaard says that this is what God has done for us. The Son of God, the second Person of the Godhead, takes on human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus reveals God fully and completely. Jesus takes the burden of human sin upon himself. Jesus bears our sin in his body upon the cross. God raises Jesus from the dead. Those who believe in Jesus and trust in his accomplished work of salvation receive that salvation. They are given the right or authority to become the children of God.

The doctrine of Incarnation tells how God, in Jesus of Nazareth, "became as we are, so that we might become as He is." The Apostle Paul in writing to the church in Ephesus says these words *"For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. He predestined us in love to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will, to the praise His glorious grace which He has freely given us in the one He loves."*

Now I have to admit that having been born and raised a Presbyterian, this passage provides an excellent opportunity to preach on predestination. However, I didn't want to put myself to sleep, let alone put you to sleep. Notice what it says, "He chose us in Christ..." God chose us in Christ before the foundations of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight and in love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons. Ladies, I do have to say that this does not leave you out when it says, "He predestined us in love to be adopted as sons."

The term *son* is a legal term. Only the son could legally inherit from the father. You will notice that in John's Gospel it says, "... to them He gave the right to become children of God." That includes the ladies, as well. This passage indicates that the term *sons* is a legal term which means that as believers we are all heirs in Christ. Both men and women are heirs in Christ because of the salvation that Jesus Christ has brought into the world through the Incarnation.

What happened to Dennis? Because he was two years old when he was adopted, Dennis's parents never tried to hide from him the fact that he was adopted. He knew that he looked a little different than his parents. Neither mom nor dad had the cleft chin that was so prominent in Dennis. Amy didn't look at all like Dennis or her adopted mom and dad. Ken and Barbara never hid from Amy the fact that she was adopted, either.

When Dennis reached the third or fourth grade, he began to wonder about his origins, about where he came from, about why his mom and dad had adopted him and who his real mom and dad were. Dennis asked Barbara one day if she loved him. It was an interesting question. Barbara's answer was wonderful. She said, "Dennis, if you were my natural born child, I would love you. I would love you because you were mine and because I had to. I would not have a choice. You belong to me. Out of all the other children in the world that we could have adopted, that we could have chosen to be our son, **we chose you**. You are mine and I love you so very much."

On this day when we talk about Incarnation, we also talk about God making us part of God's family. Because we are family, the church is not a voluntary organization. You are not here because you have chosen to be here. You are here because God has chosen you to be here. Just like in a family, things get a little messy in the church.

You didn't choose your relatives. You cannot choose your relatives. In fact, my Grandmother's cousin used to end almost every letter with this phrase, "Of all my wife's relations, I like myself the best." We don't get to choose our family. Children, you didn't get to choose your parents. Parents, you didn't get to choose your children, unless they are adopted.

But God has chosen us. Because God has chosen us, God has placed us in a context where we must choose one another, where we must live constructively and affirmatively with one another, where we must learn to love one another. It is not an option. When you are a part of the family, you must learn forgiveness and grace. You must learn how to get along. Because we have experienced grace in Jesus, how much more important it is to show that grace to others. May it be so in the coming years as we grow together as family.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. Amen.