

## **The Light of Home**

January 2, 2022

### **Jeremiah 31:7-14**

*<sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> For the LORD has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.*

*<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.*

John 1:1-18

<sup>1</sup> *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

<sup>6</sup> *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

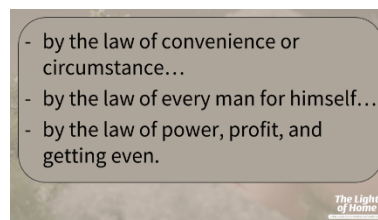
<sup>10</sup> *He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

<sup>14</sup> *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. <sup>15</sup> (John 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.'") <sup>16</sup> From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup> The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> 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.*



Welcome to the conclusion of our “Come Home for Christmas” worship series. We began with the idea of light drawing us in, welcoming us, making us feel like we belong. The Christian life is a mix of both seeing the light and of being the light. We are called to share our light with any and all that are around us. Last week Pastor Michele touched on the reasons we seek Jesus. Do we seek Jesus because we want him to fix something or... do we seek Jesus because we want to be with him? She encouraged us to be about God’s things rather than the things of this world. When we are focused on the things of God, we seek to be with Jesus on a regular basis. As we prepare to begin this time together, let us begin with a word of prayer...

As we begin, please turn with me to Jeremiah 31. The prophet Jeremiah spoke to the people of Israel during a difficult time. There were enemies all around and disagreements and fissures within. He had a tough job – this calling the people back to God. The people seemed to have forgotten who God was and, consequently, whose they were. The Israelites had abandoned the law given by God and had chosen to live by the law of convenience or circumstance, by the law of every man for himself, of the law of power, profit, and getting even. Jeremiah was charged with poking the people, with trying to correct them when they did not feel like they were doing anything wrong. After all, they were not doing anything that the world around them was not doing.



Jeremiah had to point out their flawed, self-centered logic. He had to remind the people of God that they were failing to live into the covenant with God that God was supposed to guide and inform their whole way of being. The Israelites were failing to love as the covenant community. So, Jeremiah spoke truth to the people, pointing out that their choices had consequences. As I reflected on these three “laws” that are here on the screen, it occurred to me that at times I can struggle with these very things. I can succumb to convenience, to taking the easy way. I can give in to circumstances, rationalizing and excusing with the best of them. I can become selfish, elevating my own desires above and over God’s and everyone else’s needs or desires. I can seek power or control, surrendering to the pride and ego that rises up within my heart from time to time. And I can want to be vengeful once in a while too, wanting to get even with someone for this slight or that insult. Perhaps once in a while you struggle to withstand one of these “laws” that run opposite of God’s will and ways. Like the Israelites, we too can say, ‘After all, I’m not doing anything that the world around me is not doing.’

Jeremiah was called by God to speak to the Israelites to draw them back to the covenant relationship that had guided the people for centuries. Living by these “laws” they were beginning to rot within, turning on one another instead of loving and caring for one another. The people were growing more and more empty inside, connected less and less to the God who offered peace and restoration. Just as it is in our world today when someone questions another’s pursuit of these inwardly focused things, so it was with Jeremiah. The people did not like to hear Jeremiah’s words of correction.

He often was imprisoned, thrown in pits, ridiculed and jeered. As I said earlier, Jeremiah had a tough job. Even so, Jeremiah's words were not all focused on the people's poor behavior and the consequences of living an inwardly focused life.

The middle section of the book of Jeremiah is known as "The Little Book of Consolation" – a little word of hope amongst the doom and gloom of the rest of the book.

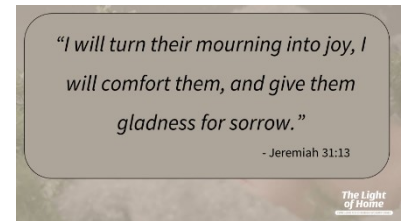


The tone in this section is even different than in the other 48 chapters of the book. As we delve into chapter 31, we hear words that are like a flower in the desert – a splash of life amidst a landscape of dryness.

Verse seven begins with an encouragement to *"sing aloud with gladness"* and to *"proclaim and give praise"* as the people cry out for God to save them. When we have sinned and fallen short, we too must begin our journey back to God with an admission, with an acknowledgement of how we have wandered. That is the heart of the communion celebration that we will turn to later in our worship service. Then, in the next two verses, God describes how the people will be gathered. God will bring home the *"blind and the lame... those with child and those in labor"* as a *"great company"* shall return to Israel. God will lead them *"by brooks of water"* as they walk along a straight path, so that they do not stumble. Once God has gathered up the people, in verse ten we read that God *"will keep them as a shepherd a flock."*

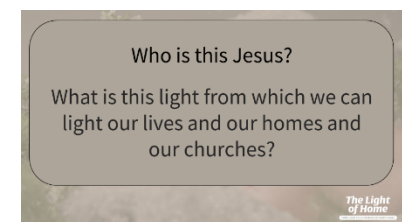
In the next few verses Jeremiah describes how God will bless Israel with grain, wine, oil, flocks, and herds. The people will be like a *"watered garden"* and in God's loving care, they *"shall never languish again."*

And then in verse fourteen, God says, *"I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow."* What words of hope! Mourning will turn to joy, sorrow to gladness. Gladness is the continuing presence of joy. Living during a time of great sorrow and deep division, these words would become a promise that the people of God would cling to.



As we have journeyed through Advent, we have focused on being home with God, on coming home for Christmas, on holding fast to the light of the world, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We have also acknowledged that home is not always an easy place to be, and that church can be a hard place for some people to come to as well. Tears can come easily when some folks think of coming home. Within this reality we have also named the fact that at the heart of any home can be that source of light and love and life that is Jesus Christ.

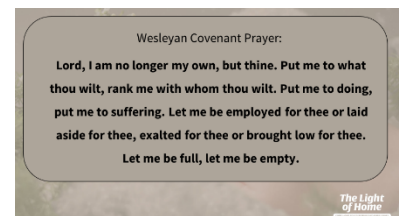
While we may have an idea of who and what Jesus is, there are many who would ask the question, 'Who is this Jesus?' Others may ask, 'What is this light from which we can light our lives and our homes and our churches?' One way to answer these questions would be to say that Jesus is the one that humanity long waited for, the one who is God with us, the one who will one day redeem each of us and all of creation. Another answer comes in the form of a creed. Since about 300 AD the church has tried to define who and what Jesus and God and the Spirit are through the use of creeds – statements of faith.



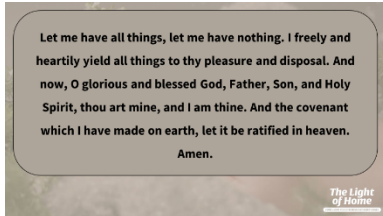
For ages the church and people of faith have wanted to try to define Jesus. We have long wanted to comprehend Jesus, to nail down just what is required to follow him. But Jesus is one who defies our understanding. He is beyond our limited comprehension. In a way, Jesus must defy our attempts to categorize and qualify him – or else we would say we have it all figured out and feel that we do not need Jesus anymore. And yet we need some way of understanding the answers to these questions, even if our comprehension is limited. Without something to cling to, to grasp ahold of, to relate to then Jesus becomes just an incomprehensible person, place, or thing.

We read the Apostles' Creed earlier in worship today. Creeds have always been one way that believers have sought to define our faith and to define Jesus, to understand him, to nail him down. Prayers are another way that we try to do these things. The Lord's Prayer would be a good example of this. There are other prayers that have long been used to express our understanding of Jesus and of our faith. On New Year's Eve, at our Covenant Renewal Service, we shared a prayer that takes aim at answering these questions. It is called the "Wesleyan Covenant Prayer." This prayer is an honest prayer, one that invites us to cling to the light as well as one that admits that not everything is easy on this journey of faith. As a pledge to walking in faith during 2022, I invite you to join me as we say this prayer in unison. Let us pray...

**Lord, I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering.**



**Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty...**



**Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.**

As you come forward for communion in a few moments, you will be given a small card that contains this prayer. I ask that you bring it home, place it somewhere that you will see it each day. I invite you to pray this prayer each day of 2022 as a commitment to living out the model of faith detailed in this prayer. When we live daily this model, we will be the light to the world.



Another way that we seek to understand the light of the world, to define who and what Jesus is, is to turn to the scriptures. Our passage from John is a beautiful song of praise that speaks to the nature of Christ. There is a power in John's words that open his gospel. It is one of my favorite passages. The words are profound. They almost take my breath away each time I read them. These words from chapter one speak to our soul. And these words, like many others in the Bible, are about each of us as much as they are about Jesus. These words, like the light, draw us in. These words, the drawing in, they are familiar to us.



On our journeys of faith, we have all tasted and seen that the Lord is good. We have received grace upon grace, as well as being surrounded by God's love and care over and over again in our lives.

We have all wrestled with the world, with our faith and doubts, with our sin. We do feel without or separated from God at times. Being people of the light, we have all both seen and touched the light, and we have all wept for lack of the light. We are both acceptors and deniers of the light. As one commentary put it concerning the light of Christ, at times we think it "too good to be true" and at other times we hope and pray that it is too good not to be true.

This Jesus, according to the Gospel of John, is nothing less than life itself. This Jesus is life in all its fulness, life in all its depth and meaning. Life as we long to live it. We can't be who we are, or who we long to be, without Jesus. He is, he told us himself, the light of the world. But in this moment, what we need to acknowledge is that he is the light of home, our home, where we live and breathe and have our being. He is our light.

As I close, I invite you to close your eyes and to hear the word of God according to the Gospel of John, chapter 1, once again. Receive these words as the light of Christ.

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Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. In the coming year, how would praying and spending some time each day with the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer strengthen your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Do you need to know Jesus better or do you need to live more deeply in his light in the coming year?
- 3) *Study*. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34. How do these words encourage you as you consider committing to a more holy life in the coming months?