

**John 1:(1-9) 10-18
Jeremiah 31: 7-14**

**First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
January 4, 2009
Second Sun. after Christmas**

The Forgotten Gift

Today we are ten days past Christmas and two days before Epiphany. It is a Sunday on which I could choose to preach about either holiday. I chose Christmas because I happen to like the passages given in the Lectionary. I specifically chose Jeremiah because I studied these two prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in seminary and enjoyed the class very much. After hearing these verses, some of you are possibly muttering or wondering to yourselves how this passage relates to Christmas. We have all finished the wrapping and opening of gift packages placed under the tree, or wherever your gifts are placed to await distribution. You have hopefully recycled your paper remnants and saved some bows for next year. The stockings have been re-hung minus some of the treats. We have all eaten enough turkey and other rich foods and are ready for a long winter's nap. Ah, yes! Christmas is come and gone. We have decorated the tree, the house, and the church. We have sung the carols. We have read the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth and the stories related to it. We have celebrated with family and friends. We shopped 'till we dropped! Christmas is come and gone. It is all over, and it is time to undecorate the tree, the house, the church and put the decorations

back into storage for next year. Yes, Christmas Day is over. But is Christmas over? When we put the decorations away, do we put God away until next year too? If you are exiled from God, maybe you do put God away until the next big Christian holiday, and maybe you only unpack God once or twice a year. Or did you even unpack God this Christmas?

Jeremiah is an Old Testament prophet whose book is the second longest of the three major prophets, Isaiah being the longest. Jeremiah lives in turbulent times when Babylonia has replaced Assyria as a major super-power in what is called the ancient Near East. I find it interesting that we, too, live in turbulent times involving countries in the same geographic area as the people in Jeremiah's time. Jeremiah is a priest and comes from a family of priests. Jeremiah is called from being a priest to become God's prophet to the nations. Jeremiah is very aware that Israel and Judah have broken the Sinai Covenant with God. Jeremiah hopes for a new covenant between the people of Israel and God which will restore Israel to favor with God. Chapter 31 of Jeremiah is part of what is known as the Book of Consolation and is where this new covenant or promise is made.

The people of Israel are in exile. They are putting their faith and trust in alliances with foreign countries such as Babylonia instead of putting their faith and trust in God their Creator. Our God can be a jealous god. In Deuteronomy 4:24, we read: “For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” God wants us to put all our trust in God, not in other people or things. When the people of Israel would rely on foreign nations for help and support, they also would rely on the gods of these nations. In other words, they would worship idols. The people of Israel see the power and wealth of the other nations and believe the foreign gods have to be better, stronger, and more powerful than Yahweh. If the people of Israel want alliances with other nations, then idolatry comes as part of the bargain. You see, the people of Israel are not satisfied with what Yahweh is giving them. Yahweh supplies them with those things they need for everyday life such as their food, clothing and shelter. The Israelites wanted what foreign countries have which is more material wealth than they need. The Israelites become greedy. God becomes jealous and angry that these Israelites sin against Him by coveting what others have and by worshipping idols. The Israelites have obviously again broken their covenant with God. When the people of Israel find their new so-called friends are not really their friends but are instead their enemies, the people of Israel come back to God to be rescued. This is a

normal pattern for the people of God. In today's lesson, the remnant people of Israel are tired of the defeat, despair, and abandonment they are experiencing in exile. But God loves these people so much that God does not want them to continue to suffer.

The people of Israel make mistakes and sin, as we all do at times. God saves them from helplessness and hopelessness by giving them a new beginning. In return, Jeremiah tells us God wants them to sing praises and shout joyfully to God. God knows them in their humanness and knows their faults and frailties. Things have not changed much over the centuries, only the contexts and situations change. We are the same as the people in Jeremiah's time. God saves us from our helplessness and hopelessness by giving US a new beginning. In response, Jeremiah tells us God wants us to sing praises and shout joyfully to God. God also knows us in our humanness and knows our faults and frailties. We still see what others have and think we need to have it too. We try unsuccessfully to live beyond what our budgets and paychecks can handle, especially in these difficult economic times. We worship material things like more expensive cars, bigger houses, designer clothes and jewelry, things that sparkle and glitter and catch our attention. Meanwhile, we shake our heads in amazement to see people sleeping on

steam grates or recessed doorways on city or town streets; people dressed in dirty, worn clothing who, of necessity, scavenge through other people's trash searching for something still usable; undernourished families, especially children, in news reports who live in Third World countries whose only meal each day may be a cup of cooked rice; people who, of necessity, wait their turn in a hospital emergency room for medicine for pneumonia only to be turned away because they have inadequate or no medical insurance; people who will be found dead in their homes from hypothermia because they do not have the money to pay for heat; families who do not have enough to eat or clothes to wear because the parents have lost their jobs when the company either downsized or closed. These people are in exile and so are we. Exile is sometimes defined as those who live in resignation, believing no newness is possible. We may shake our heads in sadness, but God also suffers when His people, His creations suffer.

God knows we make mistakes. Yet God always forgives us because He loves us. God created us, and God loves what God creates. Through Jeremiah, God issues an invitation to the Israelites in exile. God's invitation is filled with gladness. He invites them to sing aloud, raise shouts, proclaim, and praise. All these are acts of joy that Israel does not think would be

possible while they are in exile. God gives them a reason for rejoicing. Yahweh intervenes so new life can begin. Yahweh intervenes so Israel can sing for joy and be free from Babylonia's grasp. God wants Israel to renew their covenant so their creation will flourish; their social life will resume with dancing, singing, and celebrating; their community will be restored through God's powers; and their religious community will prosper and be blessed.

Those things which God does for Israel God still does for us today. God issues us the same invitation, through Jeremiah and others, to those of us who are exiled whether physically, emotionally, socially, financially, religiously and/or in other ways. God's invitation to us is also filled with gladness. He also invites us to sing aloud, raise shouts of joy, proclaim, and praise! These acts of joy are also possible for us! God desires that we do what people have done for centuries, which is to turn back to God, confess and repent our sins, read God's Word, and pray. God knows we make mistakes, but God desires we talk with Him about our mistakes and renew our covenants, individually and together, with God. God strongly desires a relationship with each of us. God suffers when we do and when we turn our

back and worship idols of greed and material sins. God forgives us even when we do not ask for that forgiveness.

The Christmas gifts have been unwrapped and the decorations will soon be put away. But wait...there is still one more gift under the tree! It must have gotten lost in the shuffle. It is a thin flat box with a simple ribbon. It has your name on it! Go on, untie the ribbon, and open the box! Yes, it is an invitation, a special invitation for you to renew your covenant with God. IT is a special, personal invitation from God to you to renew your relationship with your Lord and Savior who is born on Christmas Day, died on the Cross for you, and lives in heaven waiting for each of us. This is a gift to be unwrapped, loved, received by each of us, and kept in our hearts! May we each open this special Christmas gift from God and accept it without hesitation and with great joy! Thank you, God, for your generosity!
AMEN!