

Fill of Fatness and Satisfied With Bounty

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.

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Jeremiah 31:7-14

January 2, 2022

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

This past week, Linda and I did something we haven't done in a very long time: attend a large family gathering for Christmas. When Linda, Nicole and I first moved here to Canton, and for the first few years after Tucker and Arlo were born, we regularly made trips down to Buffalo to see my family, and further down to Allegany, near Olean, to see Linda's family. At a point, however, driving Rt. 81 through the Tug Hill in winter just got to be too much. So, for a great many years now we've simply stayed put; which, quite honestly, has been wonderful. Not that we don't enjoy our respective and rather large extended families, but there comes a time when you learn to put your energy into enjoying what is right in front of you.

II.

I suppose if we are being honest, however, one of the things we've missed most about living up here the past 20 some years has been not being close to family; especially when the kids were young, and having grandparents, or aunts and uncles nearby to help out when we were in a pinch. So, for us, the congregation became our family.

All of that kind of shifted this year with our daughter, Nicole, *finally* getting married to her long-time beau and, now, husband Chris Melville. Ta Da! Instant family! So, this past week, we had the in-laws over for appetizers and libations, and gave Chris and Nicole at least one day off from having to shuffle back and forth between our house, and Sarah and Duncan's home on Crescent Street. We enjoyed a delightful evening together including our boys, Tucker and Arlo, their sons James and Tim, and Nicole's college friend, Maggie, who is a teacher in the area.

III.

The downside was, we had to clean the house. With which, I admit, I didn't get too involved; I mean, they are Nicole's in-laws, let *her* do the vacuuming. There are, however, certain areas of responsibility which fall upon my shoulders alone; namely, my recliner and the two tables on either side, as well as the left corner of the hutch in the dining room, which I use as a kind of way-station for various papers, receipts, and things which I think I need to keep on hand. Truth be told, though, it is more of a table top a junk drawer, which Linda begrudgingly, but graciously abides. If you want to see the litmus test for where my life is at during any particular period, look no further than that corner of the hutch. With the Melvilles coming, it was time to deal with the piles of stuff which had been accumulating; especially over the last month or so. Typically, I'll do a modest glean and some straightening, but this week decided to do a deep dive right down to the bottom.

IV.

Which is where I found an envelope from 1996. No, it hasn't been sitting on the hutch for the past 25 years; I'm not that bad. It has been there at least a year, though, maybe even two; ever since my friend, Dave Deitz, mailed it to me. Prior to that, the envelope resided with a bunch of other papers and objects in a time-capsule in the bell tower of the First Presbyterian Church of Allegany, my first congregation out of seminary. It was a project I did with the church kids, with each one filling out a sheet to be included in the capsule.

Nicole's is here, with a drawing on the back, along with a photo of her at age 3 1/2, informing the future that she is 41 1/2 inches tall, that her favorite foods are pizza, macaroni and cheese and grapes; with playing in the rain and eating peanut butter cups among her least favorite things to do. When she grows up, or so she said then, she wants to own a candy store. Cute, right?

V.

Here, also, is the letter I wrote that was included with the time capsule:
To the members and friends of the First Presbyterian Church,

As you read these words, all of us here in the past are happy that somebody has found our time capsule after all these years. We can only imagine that in the past two decades much has happened in our lives. This time capsule was

a project we kids and Rev. Mike put together during the fall of 1996 as part of the children's sermon during Sunday morning worship.

In this box you will find many things. Amid pictures taken on Sunday November 10th you will find the choir eager to sing, the congregation ready for worship, kids in the sanctuary, the way the church looked, the kinds of funny cars we drove, the new sign, and all of us downstairs enjoying our monthly winter-time pancake breakfast.

You will also find in this box a lot of dreams for the future and many smiles. These were good days in our lives. Days filled with fun and wonder, hope and promise. Just about all of us kids contributed a sheet about what we want to be when we grow up. Some of us were too young to write, so our parents helped us. Some of us attached pictures and drawings, some stuck in books and stuff.

While none of us really like homework or cleaning our room, most of us really like pizza and playing with our friends. We also put a newspaper in the box so you can see what things are like back here, like how much a gallon of milk costs.

Somewhere in the box there is a savings bond. We would like the church to use this money for the kids of the future; to help them to learn that you have to start planning today for the church of tomorrow. Because the future comes sooner than you think.

We hope that, somehow, you in the future will be able to find us and help us to remember all the things we put in this box; what our lives and our world was like then, what our dreams were, and how much all the big people at this church loved us.

With great joy and hope, and on behalf of all these kids, - Rev. Mike

I will admit to you, that stumbling upon this quarter century old document, made me more than a little nostalgic and melancholy about a different time in my life, and for a congregation I also hold dear. The tugging at my heart made me aware how good we had it then, and we didn't even know it.

VI.

Today's scripture reading from Jeremiah 31 is a reminder of the promise, though not as of yet realized, which God had made to the people of Israel to sustain them until a different time in their life together when they would be gathered together from the farthest parts of the earth, and be restored as

nation. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations God will lead them back, to let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble. They shall come and sing aloud, and they shall be radiant at the goodness of the LORD: over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and herd. Their life shall become as a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. Young shall women rejoice in dance, and the young men and old shall be merry. God will turn their mourning into joy, God will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

VII.

The promise then concludes with this very interesting statement: “I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty.”

At this time of year, in the days which span Christmas through Epiphany and include the ushering in of the new year, we are especially prone to a certain melancholy and nostalgia for what once was and, at the same time, a hope for what yet might be. Like my recollections of the Allegany church, memories of the past are certainly a cherished gift which we hold most dear. And, like today’s passage from Jeremiah, the promise of a brighter future is the welcome staff upon which we lean to support us as face each tomorrow. Sometimes, though, I think we miss how filled with fatness our own present life really is, and fail to claim the satisfaction to be found in the bounty which God has already provided us.

XIII.

This week, reading my letter from the time capsule, I was overcome by a sense of bittersweetness. I harkened back to the sweetness of those good days which truly were filled with fun and wonder, hope and promise. However, I recognized the bitterness in Dave having sent me letter owing to the church having closed. Never again will people gather together to worship in that sanctuary. The choir has gone silent, and the aroma of pancakes and sausage has long ago wafted away. There are no children scurrying about, nor will there ever be again. Though hope for a better future is always a treasure, sometimes leaning too far forward casts a long shadow which hides the brightness already upon us today.

IX.

As we begin the new year, I know that all of us are hoping for something better than what we've had to endure as we begin a third year with COVID. Yes, it has been extremely taxing. Yes, we are all thoroughly tired and frustrated. Yes, a cost is being exacted which will take years to calculate. This holiday season, more than ever, feelings of melancholy and nostalgic run deep as we both pine for a simpler time in our lives and place our hope in a brighter future.

There comes a time, however, when we must learn to pour our energy into enjoying what is right in front of us. In the blessings born of love, and the new ways of being it brings to us. In a congregation that functions as a family to nurture and care for the young, the old and everyone in-between. In a church that continues not just to survive, but to thrive against all odds and obstacles.

X.

Though there will always be things we wish back, and things we eagerly await, my hope for us today, is to find both joy and contentment, in the fullness that is already ours, as we learn to be satisfied with the very real bounty God provides to us, even now, in our lives together. It is simply a matter of taking the time to do a deep dive down through all that clutters our days, to discover, remember, and realize what we treasure most is already ours to enjoy.

These, too, are good days in our lives. Days filled with fun and wonder, hope and promise. In this new year, let us be radiant with the goodness of the Lord because the future comes sooner than we think. Amen.