

# To the Faithful Remnant: Hope & Rejoicing

A reflection on the need of a New Reformation

Jeremiah 31:7-14  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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In last Tuesday's edition of the *Tulsa World*, you may have seen Bruce Plante's editorial cartoon. It showed a line of folks in front of a store counter with a big sign above it that says, "RETURNS." There is a man at the front of the line holding Old Man Time, who is wearing a banner, "2008."

Yes, there are a lot of reasons why many folks would want to return 2008 – perhaps trade it in for the newer version, 2009. That may be the case for you. For 2008 was indeed a difficult year for many. And I must admit that there have been times in the past that I, too, looked forward to a new year for the primary reason of putting the previous year behind me.

Such is not the case for me this year, however. I can say in all honesty that moving here to Tulsa in March of last year, and becoming your pastor, made 2008 one of the better years of my life. **So one reason that I am looking forward to 2009 isn't to put 2008 behind me, but rather to build upon what I would describe as an almost tangible excitement for what lies ahead for us here at College Hill.**

With the turning of the calendar there inherently comes a sense of new beginnings and hope for the coming year. **New beginnings and hope for the future are indeed two of the greatest hallmarks of the Christian faith.** That doesn't mean the year ahead will be without difficulties or challenges. But on this, the first Sunday of the New Year, it is certainly an appropriate time to focus on hope and the new beginnings offered to us by a gracious God.

As people of faith, it can never be stated enough that our hope is rooted in knowing that God is with us. This is what we have just celebrated at Christmas – the revelation that the Divine isn't just "out there" somewhere, but also dwells with and among us. And not only that, God dwells within us. That, in and of itself, is cause for great joy and celebration. But as I have been fond of saying throughout my ministry, **God is not only with us, God is also for us.**

This is beautifully revealed, as we heard a moment ago, in the Old Testament prophecy of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah, however, is known primarily as a message of doom and destruction.

Jeremiah lived just before and through the time of the Babylonian conquest of Judah (the Southern Kingdom). It included the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and involved the 50-year period of exile in Babylon. (The Northern Kingdom of Israel had previously been conquered and scattered by Assyria over 100 years earlier.)

Destruction and judgment in the book of Jeremiah is difficult and painful, involving enormous loss, death and grief. And yet in chapters 30-33, which many biblical scholars call "the Little Book of Consolation," Jeremiah's message switches to one of rejoicing and hope for the future. Today's passage, Jeremiah 31:7-14, is a passage of overwhelming joy, hope and excitement, that those who are in exile in Babylon are about to return home.

*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.*

There is one phrase that I particularly like in that passage. Jeremiah speaks of a **remnant**, the remaining small number of folks who remain faithful to God. **I've been thinking about how that word seems to apply to the state of Christianity in our day and time.**

There's no doubt that when you talk about mainline Protestant denominations (like Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, Baptists, and others) when all added together, we are now somewhat of a remnant of what we were even 50 years ago. Much like what happened in Europe last century, the number of active church members in mainline denominations is dwindling.

There are countless books and studies speculating as to why this is occurring – especially in light of the fact that conservative evangelical churches are currently growing. I tend to side with those that believe that **we are at a major turning point, a paradigm shift, in Christianity as we have known it.** It's kind of like being in a long-term season of Advent, between the now and the not yet; a waiting with anticipation to see where we're headed.

**Some say that inherent with feelings of uncertainty about the future, and experiences of chaos in the present comes a rise in fundamentalism – a grasping onto what appears as a sense of certitude and security in an uncertain world.** And though a gross oversimplification, given the option between being a fundamentalist and simply believing what one is told to believe, and being part of the remnant that values the latest in biblical and theological understanding

and knowledge, I (and I would venture to guess those of you here at College Hill) would gladly choose to count themselves amongst the remnant.

**A major question facing us in 2009, and churches like us, is how do we find ways of being relevant as well as faithful in our day and age?** How we deal with this challenge is crucial because an ever-increasing number of Americans have decided that **a faith that simply holds on to doctrines and biblical interpretations that are hundreds, if not thousands, of years old is no longer relevant to their lives.**

**While I strongly disagree that Christianity has become irrelevant, I do indeed agree with those that think it's in need of a bit of a progressive makeover – perhaps even an extreme makeover; a new reformation, if you will, the exact details of which still need to be worked out.**

Our challenge in this new year, then, is to spread the message, through our words as well as our actions, that **we are a community of faith that continues to find hope in and through our faith.**

Through wonderfully poetic language, Jeremiah reflects upon the remnant who will soon return home. It will be a time to celebrate and rejoice in the hope of new beginnings. I invite us to do the same! And what I particularly like about **Jeremiah's homecoming** is that it is one that will include all who find themselves in exile. He does this by making special mention of those for whom the long journey home posed many difficulties, if not impossibilities – the blind, the lame, and women either with newborn infants or just now in labor. In other words, **no one would be excluded from this joyous homecoming and this coming together as a new community and family of faith.**

**I find it no less than remarkable how this congregation mirrors this approach to ministry – a place of welcome, hospitality, and homecoming for people in a wide variety of different stages on their own journey of faith, and with an eye out for those who still find themselves in any manner of exile.**

Biblical commentator Howard Wallace makes the following important point concerning Jeremiah's message to those that have had to endure the painful experience of exile:

The language of the poet takes us to heights of joy, song and celebration that transcend the pain of experience. The language of the poet lifts the reader out of the place of hurt into a new possibility. In effect, the language shows us the new reality that God works in the midst of the painful experience. It is to recognize that the time of pain now becomes the place where God is present to them, even when it seems God is absent.

The same is true for us as individuals, and as a congregation, even in our times of pain and difficult challenges, in those times we may feel that we're in exile.

We then, no less than that community of old, are to embrace this sense of hope and new beginnings. So on this Sunday, so close to the Christmas promise of the Incarnation – God with us – this biblical text gives us permission to pause and simply celebrate God's love and grace and guidance as we face the future that lies before us.

**So know deep within your being that we are called together as God's faithful remnant – a remnant with and for a purpose – and that there is so much more yet to come.** And as this Christmastide season comes to a close, let us acknowledge God's presence with us and for us with renewed hope and much rejoicing!

Amen.