

“Mourning into Joy,” Rev. James Klotz, Jeremiah 31:7-17

Slackwood Presbyterian Church, Second Sunday after Christmas, Jan. 2, 2022

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If the passage we just heard from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah seems to ring a Christmas bell, there’s a good reason for it. The gospel writer quotes it in the New Testament as part of Matthew’s Christmas story. Matthew’s story is different from Luke’s, which is the one we’re used to hearing on Christmas Eve, what with the babe in a manger, shepherds and flocks.

In Matthew, Mary doesn’t seem to have to travel to get to Bethlehem, she doesn’t give birth in a stable, and no shepherds or sheep appear. Instead, wise men (astrologers, astronomers, religious scholars?) from a land to the east see a star that their studies indicate signals the birth of the King of the Jews. They go, logically enough, to Jerusalem, ancient city of the kings of Judah. Little Jesus isn’t there, of course, but they attract the attention of wicked King Herod, who is paranoid that a new king has come to overthrow him and asks the wise men to let him know where they find the baby. The wise men go to Bethlehem, find Jesus with his parents, and give him gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The wise men trick Herod and sneak directly home, and Herod is furious and, like the wicked Pharaoh centuries earlier, orders the killing of every baby boy in town. An angel warns Joseph to hide Baby Jesus, so Joseph takes the family to Egypt to live as refugees. The gruesome order is carried out, and Matthew quotes Jeremiah:

A voice is heard in Ramah,  
lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children;  
she refuses to be comforted for her children,  
because they are no more (Jer 31:15//Matt 2:18).

Perhaps it's only appropriate that Matthew draws from the well of Jeremiah for words of deep grief and despair. Jeremiah, among the Old Testament prophets, is so famous for his bitter laments that the English word "jeremiad" is named after him.<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah's figurative Rachel, weeping for her children, the tribes of Israel, becomes the literal wailing of inconsolable mothers for lost infants.<sup>2</sup> It is the wailing of a particular pain, one I won't dwell on, other to say that it is one that has touched the lives of some people I love. It is why Rachel's weeping touches us to our very core.

But Matthew leaves out the rest of the Jeremiah quote, which is remarkably hopeful for someone as dour as Jeremiah, even gleeful: "thus says the Lord: keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears...there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country" (31.16-7). Matthew's audience would surely have known the rest of the quote, and it's as if Matthew lets us fill in the rest of the story with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that follows. Pain is deep, pain is real, and pain does not go away quickly. But there *is* hope, and there *is* joy in that.

I read an article in the *Washington Post* on Christmas Eve that really stuck with me. In it, the reporter interviewed various mental health professionals about the nearly two years of collective trauma that we have *all* been experiencing due to the COVID pandemic— many of us to the breaking point. It's been exacerbated by the way that there doesn't seem to be any neat and tidy end in sight—there will be no clear moment of victory, an Armistice Day or VE Day—and by the fact that as soon as we seem to see a light at the end of the tunnel, we get hit by a virulent new variant like delta or omicron. Our coping skills are strained to the limit.

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<sup>1</sup> *OED*, s.v. Jeremiad.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick A. Niedner, "Rachel's Lament," *Word & World* 22, no. 4 (2002).

My friends who still work in the airline industry tell me horror stories of passengers acting out violently in flight. We saw the story about customers assaulting a restaurant greeter in New York who asked to see their vaccination cards as require by City ordinance. Dr. Vaile Wright of the American Psychological Association says, “we’re just not meant to live under this level of tension for such a prolonged period. So what that ends up doing is it really wears on our coping abilities to the point where we aren’t able to regulate our emotions as well as we could before.” Professor Roxane Cohen Silver notes that the pandemic has given us a steady stream of stories (whether they’re from folks we know personally or folks we hear about on the news or social media) about illness and death that psychologists call “cascading traumas,” and the stress from cascading traumas is cumulative. And it’s also both isolating and dividing, as we each try to make sense of things by retrenching into our own ideological camps and clinging to theories that give us something or somebody to blame, exacerbating what is already a deeply divided society, especially politically speaking.<sup>3</sup>

If there’s anyone in the Bible who can speak to this kind of collective, cascading trauma, it’s Jeremiah. After years of warning the kings and people of Judah about the coming disaster and earning himself some powerful political enemies, Jeremiah watched helplessly as the city was besieged and captured by the forces of Babylon. His friends took him, kicking and screaming, to Egypt, where he became a refugee himself, while Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar looted the Temple and burned it. Jeremiah laments in some of the rawest, most intense emotion in scripture, and yet even he finds a place of hope amidst all of his own pain and his people’s pain. And I think he’s got something to tell us about how to cope together with *our* pain.

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<sup>3</sup> Marisa Iati, “The pandemic has caused nearly two years of collective trauma. Many people are near a breaking point,” *Washington Post*, December 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/24/collective-trauma-public-outbursts/>

Trauma is a pain that is all too often suffered in loneliness, but it is one that *can* find comfort in companionship and empathy. It may never go away completely, but healing can begin. It's one of the things that I really appreciate about "Blue Christmas" services, such as our friends up at Kingston Presbyterian hold that folks from Slackwood have participated in. These services offer a respite from the enforced cheerfulness of the holiday season for those for whom Christmas is a time of mourning, of loss, or of any kind of sadness. They allow a place for weeping among the merrymaking of the world.<sup>4</sup> One of the most important things these services do is to allow others to come and show their support, their solidarity, with those who hurt. It's not about waving a wand and making the pain go away. It's about sitting next to someone, and saying "I am genuinely sorry that you are hurting. I truly hope it will get better for you soon. In the meantime, I'll be right here with you." And there *is* joy in that. We as a society, as a community, and as the Church need the kind of joy that acknowledges the pain and despair we are all going through—the kind of joy that gives us hope for the future.

My childhood church in Georgia, like many, had a tradition of a Candlelight Communion service on Christmas Eve. There would be the usual lessons and carols, but before we got to the lighting of the candles and "Silent Night," we would celebrate the sacrament of communion. Some people didn't care for it because it made for a *very* long service, especially those with kids excited about Santa's visit. Others thought it was a strange tonal shift to go from "the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head" to "this is my blood, shed for you" and back to "holy infant, so tender and mild."

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<sup>4</sup> Religion News Service, "Blue Christmas: Churches acknowledge that the season of joy isn't always joyous," *Presbyterian Outlook*, December 19, 2017, <https://pres-outlook.org/2017/12/blue-christmas-churches-acknowledge-season-joy-isnt-always-joyous/>

But our senior pastor always insisted on it, once telling a church member who complained that Christmas was *supposed* to be about the birth of baby Jesus, *not* the death of adult Jesus, that a big reason that birth of the savior *is* so important is that it makes *possible* the life and ministry and also the saving death and resurrection of the Christ. Communion by the light of the advent wreath is emotionally dissonant, but *that* was the point.

There is a little bit of emotional dissonance in the ancient liturgy I recite at the table. “This *is* the joyful feast of the people of God,” but it is also when we remember “the night on which he was betrayed and arrested”. We ask for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on these humble gifts of bread and vine, but they are tangible reminders of the tortured and broken body and spilt blood of Christ on the cross. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we remember and proclaim the sadness and grief of Jesus’ death, looking forward to the joy we shall all share when he comes again.

That, beloved, is what I think is the kind of joy Jeremiah is getting at with us today. The promise is *not* that there will *be* no suffering. There *is* no guarantee that there will be no mourning. The promise *is* that mourning *will*, someday, turn to joy.

Joy comes in all kinds of surprising ways, and often it appears in packages we don’t quite expect. We’ll experience this at the end of this morning’s service. This is the time of the liturgical year in which we get to sing Christmas songs and not feel awkward about it. Planning this service, “Joy to the World” seemed a natural fit, but we’ve sung it a lot in the last few weeks. Fortunately, the new *Glory to God* hymnal we use here at Slackwood has a sort of “easter egg” with this text. “Joy to the World” appears twice in the hymnal. The first time, it’s in the Christmas section, with the tune that we’re used to singing in North America. It’s become so automatic to associate the tune with Christmas here that we miss the fact that Isaac Watts

didn't originally write the words of "Joy to the World" as a Christmas carol, but as a hymn about the *second* coming of Christ based on Psalm 98.<sup>5</sup> The editors surprise us by including the text again in the section about Christ's return to the traditional tune used in Britain. By singing beloved words to a tune we're not used to, together we "repeat the sounding joy" in a surprising way.

In this scripture passage, when mourning turns to joy, it happens in community. "Young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry." This kind of joy crosses any boundaries of gender or age. It crosses time and space and isn't limited by social distancing, over livestream, over Zoom. Rachel's lone, inconsolable weeping is only relieved when she *hears* all of her returning children. "They [all of them, the whole people] *shall come and sing aloud* on the height of Zion, and they *shall be radiant* over the goodness of the Lord."

*There* is the Joy of Christmas—the miracle of Christmas. That God almighty has become truly human and lived with us. God the creator of the universe knows what it is like to weep, to shout, to laugh, to mourn, and to pray. The doleful cries of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" have become the strains of "Joy to the World, the Savior reigns," the one who will wipe every tear from every eye.

And there *is* joy in that. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Gaunt, "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come," in *Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology* (Canterbury: Canterbury Press), <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/j/joy-to-the-world,-the-lord-is-come>.