

*January 5, 2020*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Last week, by proxy, I offered three invitations:

To give yourselves the gift of exulting in beginnings for 12 Christmas days.

To let Christmas end in your heart the divisions that separate people.

And to let yourselves trust in the eternal Word, by working as the embodiment of *Christ* in the world, be the embodiment of *Christmas* in the world.

Well, here we are, on the twelfth and last day of Christmastide. So, what's next?

The twentieth century theologian, mystic, and activist Howard Thurman offers a beautiful meditation—

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.

—Howard Thurman

The work of Christmas: How do we find the work of Christmas in today's scripture?

Jeremiah, writes to the Israelites, and to us, from dark days. His life spanned the period of the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem, and the exile of his people, the near-complete dissolution of the civil society of the ancient Israelites. Passages like the one today are not thick on the ground in Jeremiah, because he is mostly convinced that because of the disobedience of the people, the destruction of their nation is inevitable. But here is a moment where Jeremiah is looking forward, forward to a time long after his, forward to a time when the Israelites have returned to God's favor, when God will "gather them from the farthest parts of the earth," rebuild nations,

bring peace. Jeremiah tells us that God will gather his people back together and turn their mourning into joy, comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

What, though, is the connection between rebuilding the nations and turning mourning into joy? I believe that the work that Jeremiah calls us to—the work that Howard Thurman also calls us to—external work, work in the world—relies on internal work. We can muscle through some of it—I have definitely shown up at my church's soup kitchen in a foul mood, and the hungry at our meal were no less fed for my foul mood. But it's not sustainable. To do the real work that we are called to do in our baptismal covenant, we can't do it begrudgingly or crankily. We must have, and care for, and strengthen our relationship with God, we must trust in God's knowledge of us, and in prayer, deepen our knowledge of God. Allowing that relationship to work within us, that is what will give us the strength to do this work. Personally, I recommend a LOT of contemplative prayer.

Now, this can be slow and painful, this work of allowing God to turn our mourning into dancing. It doesn't "just happen." Anyone who has ever experienced great tragedy has has *someone* unhelpfully say to them that everything is fine, or is about to be fine, or is happening for a good reason you can't see yet because ... handwave ... because... God? As if in a moment of terror, despair, mourning, misery, war one might simply sit down with a meditation cushion and *poof!* Mourning into dancing. No, allowing room for hope in hopelessness, allowing room for healing—that is hard work. So *let us recognize* that when Jeremiah exhorts us to "sing aloud with gladness" and to "proclaim and give praise," he knows he is not asking for something easy. He is not telling the people to rejoice in victory—rejoicing in victory is easy—he is telling people to rejoice in God's faithfulness even in the midst of apparent disaster. The work of Christmas begins with believing, with Jeremiah, that even in the midst of darkness and destruction that darkness and destruction are not all there is. To remember, in the word's of last week's gospel that "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not, does not, will not overcome it."

When we get ourselves there, or, even, as we are getting ourselves there to that place of hope and rejoicing, the work of Christmas continues: find the lost. In the Gospel today, Luke offers us a vignette from the youth of Jesus that almost mirrors in Luke's storytelling the kinds of parables that Jesus will tell when his ministry is well and truly underway. On the face of it, young kid, wanders off from his parents and gets lost. Panicked parents run around looking for him, find him, and and chastise him. I assume that most parents can relate.

But who is lost in this story? As the young Jesus points out to his extremely exasperated parents, it's not him! He reverses the narrative. Jesus comes to *find*, and, as Matthew points out, he

begins his mission among the lost sheep of Israel. Word-made-flesh *will find* the lost, the most unexpected lost in the most unexpected places. Here, he finds the lost seated at the centers of power, like the temple, where he amazes them with his understanding. Later he will find the lost among the tax collectors and the sinners, among the outcast and marginalized. When we set out to do his work, where do we find the lost?

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It's the twelfth day of Christmas. It's the last day of Christmas. What's next? When we put away the festival regalia, when we finish off the last of the cookies ... what's next? The work of Christmas—our work every day: The lost, the broken, the hungry, the prisoner, the nations, the people, the heart. How will you serve? And with what music in your heart?

The festival ends.

Let the service begin.

***Texts for 1/5/2020***

[Jeremiah 31:7-14](#)

[Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a](#)

[Luke 2:41-52](#)

[Psalm 84 or 84:1-8](#)



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