

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity | Jeremiah 31:23-25  
Natvig Reunion - 150 Years in America  
July 30, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

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Almighty God, our heavenly Father, whose mercies are new unto us every morning and who, though we have in no way deserved Your goodness, abundantly provide for all our wants of body and soul, give us, we pray, Your Holy Spirit, that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness toward us, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 147)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for this morning is taken from today's Old Testament lesson, from the thirty-first chapter of the book of the prophet Jeremiah. We hear these words again in Jesus' name:*

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Once more they shall use these words in the land of Judah and in its cities, when I restore their fortunes: 'The LORD bless you, O habitation of righteousness, O holy hill!' And Judah and all its cities shall dwell there together, and the farmers and those who wander with their flocks. For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish." <sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

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In Christ Jesus, who has gone to prepare a place for us, so that we may be with Him forever, dear fellow redeemed:

What is the place that you think of as your home? Is it where you currently live? Is it where you grew up? Those of you who have lived in the same place for decades might have an easier time answering this question. Others of you who have moved around a bit might identify "home" less with a location and more with family members or your belongings. For some of you, home might be this part of northeast Iowa where your parents and grandparents and great-grandparents lived, even though you never lived here yourself.

I

Abram grew up in the city of Ur in the southeastern part of modern-day Iraq and moved with his father to the city of Haran in the northern part of modern-day Syria. But neither of those places was to be his home. The LORD told him to leave his country and his father's house and go to the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1). This was the land where his offspring would live. But Abram was a nomad, wandering from place to place with his herds and flocks. His son Isaac lived the same life, as did his sons Jacob and Esau. When Jacob's son Joseph was made the second-in-command in Egypt, Jacob and all his children and grandchildren moved there.

In Egypt, the family multiplied to such an extent that a Pharaoh ruling long after Joseph's death enslaved these "Israelites." Now, God's promise to give the land of Canaan to Abram's

descendants seemed like nothing but an empty dream. Pharaoh would never let them go. But the LORD called Moses to lead them out of Egypt, and they were delivered from slavery. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the LORD brought them to the land He had promised, the land of Canaan.

What a gift the LORD had given them! No more wandering. No more longing for a place to call their own. They were finally home! But it wasn't long before they forgot the One who brought them out of slavery and gave them this land. They began to think that their success was due to their own strength. They thought that they could blend the religious practices of the people around them into their own culture without losing sight of who they were. It wasn't long before their hearts were given over to the false gods of the Gentile nations. Even when they performed the ceremonial rites that God commanded, they were only going through the motions.

God sent the Assyrians against the northern kingdom of Israel, and in 722 B. C. the Israelites were either killed or exiled, never to be heard from again. The southern kingdom of Judah survived awhile longer, until its people were also exiled in the year 586. God had given them a good home, *"a land flowing with milk and honey"* (Jer. 32:22), but they had forgotten Him. They praised themselves for their prosperity, and trusted in their own efforts and abilities. The LORD said through the prophet Jeremiah, *"For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.... Thus says the LORD: 'Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it'"* (6:13,16).

However the LORD did not forget His people. He brought them back from their captivity in Babylon. He returned them to the home promised to their forefathers so long before. He did exactly what He said He would do in today's text, *"And Judah and all its cities shall dwell [in the land] together, and the farmers and those who wander with their flocks. For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish."*

For many of you, your forefathers set out from the lands of Europe many years ago. The people who formed the congregations of Jerico and Saude were Norwegian immigrants. They left Norway because the population there was expanding, and they heard about land for the taking in America. Men, women, and children left their families and the only home they had ever known, and got aboard overcrowded ships to make the long journey to a new country. These families could bring along only the most essential items. Among these items could almost always be found a Bible, a Catechism, and a Lutheran hymnbook.

They arrived with hardly anything to their name but trusted that their gracious LORD would provide for them. And He did. Like the Israelites of old, He led them to their own land. And He gave them the strength and the will to cultivate the land and make a home for themselves. It was hard work, but the LORD blessed it. These humble settlers gave credit where credit was due. They confessed along with their first pastor, the Rev. U. V. Koren, the words we just sang, *"Not we, but the Lord is our Maker, our God: / Glory be to God! / His people we are, and the sheep led by His rod; / Sing praise unto God out of Zion!"* (ELH #56, v. 2).

## II

But the land could not provide everything that these industrious settlers needed. It gave them the materials required for barns and shelters. It produced food for themselves and their livestock. It satisfied their physical needs well enough. But the land could not provide for their spiritual needs. Only the Word of God can do that.

Before I came to serve this parish, I was a pastor in the western part of Washington in the city of Tacoma, south of Seattle. The religious culture in the Pacific Northwest is not what it is here. Many do not go to church or have any interest in organized religion. When they have free time (typically on the weekends), people like to go hiking in the mountains or spend time on the coast. They imagine that nature is their connection to the divine, if there is a god at all.

This mentality is not as obvious in the Midwest, but we are not far behind. Our culture likes to present religious teaching something like the menu at a restaurant. "Oh, I'll take this, but could you bring it without this and this? I just can't stand that. I don't know how anyone could swallow that." It used to be for our grandparents and great-grandparents that whatever the Bible said was the truth. Now we hear talk about how Jesus' apostles were chauvinistic or homophobic. Jesus Himself is recast as a good teacher whose core message is that we should love and accept everyone just the way they are.

But is that why the Son of God became Man? Was it His mission to deliver the message that everyone is perfect just the way they are? Our ancestors knew better, and I hope we do too. Jesus described His mission in this way, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Lk. 19:10). Who are the lost? He was not referring to the Israelites exiled by the Assyrians, or to the Judeans taken by the Babylonians. He is talking about you and me and all sinners. We are those who are lost in our sins by nature. We have wandered far off the right path and cannot find our way back again. In our sin, we have no prospect of a good home or a bright future.

But some do not think they are lost. They think they have all they need in this life. "The weak and the small-minded might go for what the Bible says, but not me." But then where is your hope? What purpose does your life have? What good will all your earthly wealth do when death comes? Our beloved ancestors buried around this church do not have bank accounts anymore. They do not own land. They wouldn't care if they did. They left behind their temporary riches in this world for eternal riches in heaven. They left their good homes here for a far better home where the LORD dwells.

They did not get there by hard work or a noble character. They got there by grace. God the Father sent His Son to gather up the lost like a good shepherd gathers his wandering sheep [which is depicted so nicely on the altar painting at Saude]. Jesus came to save each weary soul, every person languishing in sin, all those who had fainted along the way. He came to save you. He came to give you what you cannot earn or buy or manufacture or produce. He came to win for you the forgiveness of your sins, which could only be obtained through the shedding of His holy blood.

This is the heart of Christian teaching, that "*God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*" (Jn. 3:16). This is the Gospel truth that has been passed down to us from generation to generation. It never goes out of style. It never

needs to change. It is God's timeless promise to the world of sinners. Whoever comes to Him with a humble heart, repenting of all sins, trusting His gracious Word – these He will never cast out (Jn. 6:37).

The LORD loves to forgive sins. He loves to provide living water from the well of His Word. He loves to feed the hungry with His own body and blood. And He loves to bring the weary and faint to Himself in heaven. There, our struggle will be over, our hard labor ended, and our longing for a lasting home satisfied. As our Norwegian ancestors sang, "In heav'n above, in heav'n above, / No tears of pain are shed, / For nothing there can fade or die; / Life's fullness round is spread, / And like an ocean, joy o'erflows, / And with immortal mercy glows / Our God, the Lord of hosts!" (ELH #542, v. 3).

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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