



## *“Confidence”*

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14

Al Bunis

**January 2, 2011**

The First Sunday of Advent

At the outset here, I have to admit something. Yesterday, New Year's Day, wasn't my favorite day...and not just because so many of those great old college football bowl games have been moved from New Year's Day...although that does bother me.

No...yesterday we took down our Christmas tree...which is a ritual that I find extremely depressing. As Lynn will tell you, I pretty much mope through the entire process.

I'm guessing some of you have similar feelings as the holiday season comes to an end...and if that's the case, today's reading from Jeremiah might be appropriate.

It's an unambiguously upbeat passage that is part of a block in Jeremiah called the "Book of Consolation." Consolation...that seems like just the right antidote...for those of us still moping around.

Even though the Church calendar says that this is the second Sunday of Christmastide...for many it feels like the party is over...and it's back to the real world.

And so with the euphoria of Christmas over...and facing the challenges of day-to-day life...maybe what we need is a pick-me-up...maybe we need a boost to get our engines going again. And this passage...which is uplifting from start to finish...it might just help.

It begins instructing hearers to "sing aloud with gladness"...and ends saying "my people shall be satisfied with my bounty..."

But as the name "Book of Consolation" implies, this message was being delivered to an audience that also needed picking up.

Jeremiah was the prophet who had the very sad distinction of prophesying during the final years surrounding the fall of Jerusalem...the bitter end of the once great kingdom of Israel.

No one knows for sure exactly when our specific passage was composed...but the conventional wisdom places it either...just before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians...or just after the destruction...at the beginning of the period known as the exile...when many important citizens were sent away from their beloved Zion.

Either way, doom was clearly in the air.

And so the uplifting tone is surprising...not just because these were such bad times...but also because up to this point in Jeremiah's prophetic career, what he had to say was almost entirely about warning and condemnation. Up to this point, he had been a brutally blunt pessimist.

He prophesied that the end was coming for the nation...that the end was coming because the nation continued to neglect their covenant relationship with the God they knew as Yahweh. So yes...this message was a real downer.

And yet, here Jeremiah dramatically shifts gears...the one who was a pessimist...is suddenly an optimist. He says that God is going to “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...”

Jeremiah is saying the exiled people would be gathered again back to God’s womb...be brought back home. Even though the covenant was broken...God would renew his covenantal relationship. For Jeremiah...Yahweh was not just a judgmental God...but also a God of redemption.

What makes this prophecy especially audacious is the simple fact that...for all intents and purposes, the Israelite God...the one who is supposed to make this good stuff happen...their God was looking pretty weak.

In a polytheistic world...where each nation was championed by their respective collections of gods...the one nation with the single God of justice and righteousness...that God had lost...and all hope seemed lost.

And so, Jeremiah directly confronts this obvious flaw in his exhortation of hope...he warns the so-called nations: “Hear the word of the Lord, O Nations”...“He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.”

You see...Jeremiah is saying that...contrary to conventional wisdom...it was not the nations who won...but instead Yahweh was in control all along...it was God who sadly allowed His people to take a fall...for not living up their end of the covenant.

But, just as the Israelites were punished...they would be forgiven and redeemed. What Jeremiah is saying is that...without the covenant faith...all was lost. With renewal of that covenant faith...all would be gained.

Now, I don’t know about you...but the remarkable thing to me about what Jeremiah is doing here...is that there isn’t a trace of doubt in his voice...despite the horrible circumstances.

For Jeremiah...**redemption was not just a promise...it was a certainty.** This is the kind of confidence Jeremiah has in God.

And his logic was simple. The God of Israel...is a God of relationship...and God wants...maybe even craves relationship with the people.

What Jeremiah is saying...really all the prophets...well, actually, to me it’s the central Biblical message...and it is a message that is irrespective of whether you believe God punishes or not.

The Biblical message to the people of God is this: **without relationship with God...so much is lost...but with that relationship...so much is gained.** Especially when times are difficult.

For Jeremiah...there was no doubt that this God of relationship would redeem His people. **This wasn’t a prediction...of this Jeremiah was certain.**

Now that’s confidence...confidence in God’s redemptive power.

And so when we fast forward to present day...when we look at our world...a world in which many of us tend to look at everything in realistic terms...to apply logic...to weigh

outcomes...to weigh relative truths...and often hedge our bets...the obvious question is this:

- Who in their right mind has that kind of confidence about anything? Who has that kind of confidence in God?

Well...the answer is not so obvious...in fact, the answer might even be surprising. Who could have that kind of certainty in this day and age? The answer is...the answer is actually...we can.

From the earliest days of Christianity, arguably the greatest power of the faith has been how believers are able to feel joy in their current life...no matter what was going on.

And the joy comes from believing that...through Christ's life, death and resurrection...as well as our own repentance...that our relationship with God is redeemed...that our relationship transcends the day to day ups and downs of life.

And in that transcendence can be a sense of calm and confidence...confidence that no matter what happens...God is there to help.

What I'm really talking about is the foundational Christian idea that through our faith...not only **will we** be saved...freed....but **we are already** redeemed...despite of how things look on the ground.

Throughout the history of our faith...this idea that we don't need to be constantly preoccupied with the future has been so powerfully evident...and not because we always get what they want...of course not.

But because of the confidence that even in difficult times...we can be can feel serenity that comes from God's love...confidence in the midst of storms.

Whether in the earliest Martyrs who were comfortable staring death in the face...or the American Slaves who followed their faith in Christ...to get through their nightmare in bondage...or even drug addicts or criminals who beat addiction or a life of crime...through embracing Christ.

It's the belief that my life matters...current evidence to the contrary. Christ tells me so.

And if my life matters to God...then I know something good is bound to happen. I may not know how or when...but I know something good is bound to happen. I believe it in my bones.

This is a confidence born of faith that can make all the difference in the world. And it's a confidence that allows room for doubt and questions...the kind of doubt and questions we see so often throughout Scripture...even in Christ who asked on the cross..."why have you forsaken me?"

In a secular sense...we all know that confidence begets confidence. I know that when I feel good...when I am prepared...or feel that what I am doing is the right thing...or that others have confidence in me...things tend to go better.

But in our faith, I'm talking about more than just the power of positive thinking...which while a good thing...doesn't have the underpinning I'm talking about. I'm talking about that special feeling that comes when we're confident God is behind us.

When we've done...not only all we can do...but when we've also reached out to God...to ask for God's help...when we have the confidence in God to reach out to God...that takes confidence to the next level.

For me, that's when my confidence is highest. That's when I feel really prepared.

**Plymouth Church**  
**Sermon January 2, 2011, Al Bunis**

The last day of class...the last day of a semester or school year...this is usually a very happy day. But there was something unusual about May 13, 2008.

It was the final meeting of our “Preaching and Worship” class. The professor walks in. The Rev. Dr. Edward Hunt. He looked characteristically sharp. His usual bow tie.

But this time...something felt slightly off...to begin with he was a few minutes late.

And then Dr. Hunt...he told us what was going on. Just the day before...his church had burned down.

Dr. Hunt was not only a professor...he was also pastor...for over 25 years...at the Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Wappingers Falls, NY.

The church had raised the money...\$9 million in all...to build a new sanctuary. And the work was going very well. They were getting close to completion...everyone was getting excited about moving in later that year.

And poof...it was gone. All of his...all of the congregation’s hard work...gone.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Hunt hadn’t had any sleep the night before class. And then he proceeded to preside over the most powerful class...and provide perhaps the most powerful personal testimony...I’ve had the privilege to witness.

And the message was simple. He would not “give up or be discouraged”. He would not get mad. He would not make unsubstantiated accusations...which for an African-American church...at a time when lots of African-American churches were burning...that alone was profound.

He knew he was going to rebuild. This was not in doubt. He would raise the funds... somehow. His voice was not uncertain.

And how did he know this? In his own words, he “chose to trust God in all this...” and to “remember whose we are, not just who we are...” He said he “wasn’t being a martyr...” but that he “just trusts God.”

And while they would do the necessary investigations...he refused to get angry at the perpetrators...instead he would “pray for them.”

He said there was no need to get angry. He was not going to...as he said...“shame Christ” by misbehaving...or “allow his faith to be a compromise.”

And then turning to us...his students...preparing us for our own tests...and sounding like the prophets of old...sounding like Jeremiah...he told us to remember “how God brought you through in the past”...and that “God is for us.”

These are words to live by...confidence in the flesh.

And so you may not be surprised to know that not only did Bethel Missionary Baptist raise the funds pretty quickly and start rebuilding...they moved into the new sanctuary this past October.

One of the assignments for Dr. Hunt’s class was to write a paper answering the following question: “Why must we worship God?” I had turned in my paper two weeks before this last class.

If I had the chance to do a rewrite...I would make a very simple point. It’s the same point Dr. Hunt demonstrated in that class. It’s also the same point Jeremiah demonstrated to his desperate people.

**Plymouth Church**  
**Sermon January 2, 2011, Al Bunis**

By worshipping God...we demonstrate trust and confidence in God. Worship is about celebration of God...and giving confident thanksgiving that God will be there for us. Worship is...at its core...an act of trust in God.

Jeremiah was so confident about God...that he tells his depressed people to break into song. He instructs the people to "sing aloud with gladness"...this long before any hint of redemption was on the horizon.

When we have the courage for celebratory worship in the face of our fears...before something good has happened...now that is a real demonstration of confident faith in God. And that is exactly what Dr. Hunt was doing.

And that is exactly what we do here in our worship each Sunday. In our praising of God...in our giving thanks to God...in our singing love songs to God...and in our celebrating what God has done for us...starting with creation...and continuing with His Son.

Yes...if I had the chance to rewrite that paper...I would say that worshipping God is all about confidence...

...confidence that God is on our side...

...confidence that while we may not know what is in front of us...we do know that with God's help, we will get through it.

Worshipping God...now that feels like the right way to start the New Year.

All praise and glory be to God...our creator...redeemer...and our sustainer. All praise and glory be to God.

Amen.

© Al Bunis, 2011

Go now with God.  
Be not tempted to stay in the safety of known places.  
Be not tempted to go only in your own time.  
Choose to go with God.  
Elect not to go alone.

Go in the faith that...  
There is no valley so low...  
No wilderness so vast...  
No passage so crooked...  
That God is not already there...waiting to be with you.  
Amen.