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Scripture: Jeremiah 30:18-22

A few years back, a group of Israeli researchers were able to grow a sapling from a date seed found at the ancient fortress of Masada. Masada was a man-made mountain commissioned by King Herod in the First Century to be the home of his winter palace overlooking the Dead Sea. The seed found on Masada came from the Judean date palm, a species that once flourished in the Jordan River Valle, but had since been extinct for centuries. The seed, named Methuselah after the oldest person in the Bible, was dated to be about 2,000 years old. This is the oldest seed ever brought back to life and may help to restore a species of biblical trees.¹ What a connection to ancient biblical times.

When I was visiting the Holy Land back in 2012, one of my favorite places in Jerusalem was an olive grove with trees that were so old they were probably alive when Jesus walked the land. The trees were right next to the place many archaeologists believed was the site of the Garden of Gethsemane, so I could picture Jesus walking amongst these very trees as he agonized and prayed.

I visited a lot of biblical sites on that trip that were being excavated and restored so we could get a glimpse of what they would have looked like in their former glory. Sometimes restoration projects were a bit of a guess work. Archeologists combined biblical descriptions, knowledge of cultural trends and the material present at the ancient site to do their best reconstructing the area. One of the hardest ones to picture was the structure in Jerusalem that they called David's Palace. It was literally a pile of rocks on a hill side with some remnants of inner walls. The rest was up to your imagination.

Today's text from Jeremiah is about restoration, about bringing back to life that which had been lying dormant or even dead. It is a test of imagination for the people of God who had been carried off into exile and witnessed such horrors as the land God had given them was stripped away. God promised them that their children would be like the children of old, restored to the land where justice and righteousness would reign. They would be a sizable nation with reestablished dwellings and a leader that came from their own people, rather than being ruled by a foreign nation. This vision in Jeremiah is a complete reversal of their current reality. Everything that had caused them pain and separated them from God would be fixed. But to truly believe, despite their current circumstances, took faith and imagination.

There is an old story circulating in the Netherlands about an ancient church. Its sanctuary, like so many others that had come through the turbulent period of the Reformation, was simple with plain, whitewashed walls.

The people of that church had a tradition, so old that no one remembered its origins. As worshipers entered the church, they would stop and silently bow in the direction of one particular whitewashed wall. No one knew why. They just did it. It was tradition.

In modern times, it was decided that it was time to renovate the church. The restorers began to strip the accumulated layers of whitewash off the interior walls. When they got to this particular wall, they discovered a fresco that had been hidden under successive layers of whitewash. It was a beautiful, centuries-old painting of Christ. No one in the parish was old

¹ Ari Rabinovitch, "Researchers confirm age of 'Methuselah' tree, *Reuters*, June 12, 2008. <http://uk.reuters.com>. Retrieved December 9, 2014.

enough to have remembered it. Yet, everyone had been bowing to it, without recalling why. It was the restoration experts who had revealed what had once been there.²

Back in our reading of Exodus, we heard God's covenantal language: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God." (Exodus 6:7). And then later he explained the conditions of this covenant: "if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Exodus 19:5). The covenant required a two-way relationship.

God is a relational god. God desires to be in relationship with people and to live among them. God enjoyed the beauty and joy of a personal relationship with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8), but that divine/human relationship was lost because of human disobedience and human striving to be more like God. The purpose of God's covenant with the people of Israel is to have that intimate relationship with his people again. So, in this text from Jeremiah, God promises that there will be a day when everything will be restored. At that time, the vision of an intimate relationship will be reality: they will be God's people and he will be their God. Jeremiah mentions this vision four different times through the book.

However, restoration is only possible after human sin is dealt with. What broke the relationship had to be accounted for first. This means that the current generation that was removed from the Holy Land would not be allowed to return. The hope would be placed in the next generation. They still had to live with the consequences of their lack of faithfulness, but the promise of God's restoration was there for the future. And when that restoration would occur, God's people would get a total makeover. There would be a new city filled with joyful citizens that would endure through future generations. Out of that city would come thanksgiving and the sound of merrymaking.

As we look toward Christmas, we hear echoes of these promises in the coming of Jesus who would also bring restoration. John the Baptist came before Jesus to prepare the way so that Jesus could minister to the people. However, Jesus' coming is a little bit of a mixed bag. John the Baptist says that Jesus stands ready with a winnowing fork to clear the chaff from the threshing floor for burning. Jesus comes with judgment and condemnation of our sinfulness, but according to John the Baptist this is good news. The fire that Jesus will bring is a refining fire that will account for human sinfulness before the reality and joy of restoration can be true reality. This restoration would take time. Restoration is a complicated task.

When it came time to restore the 16-foot-5 statue of Michelangelo's David, the Associated Press reported that the project would take 6 months. Experts were using regular-sized Q-tip-style cleaners on the end of a long stick to give his ears a good going-over. Given the size of David's ears, the task of cleaning them would be laborious. The task of cleansing and restoring with confession and repentance is never an easy task either.

Christian author Barbara Brown Taylor writes about a classmate of hers who was a Lebanese Presbyterian that threw a theological temper tantrum in seminary. He said, "All you Americans care about is justification! You love sinning and being forgiven, sinning and being forgiven, but no one seems to want off that hamster wheel. Have you ever heard of sanctification? Is anyone interested in learning to sin a little less?"³

On the cross, Jesus took upon himself the eternal consequence of human sinfulness so that the joy of eternal restoration could be fully realized. For the people of Israel, their exile felt like a sign that God had completely forgotten them or at least that God was powerless to stop their invaders. This went against everything they believed about their God. Jeremiah tells them

² homileticonline.com

³ homileticonline.com

that their exile is a consequence of their disobedience. However, they can hold on to the hope that God will renew his covenant with his people in the future. At that time a new generation will have learned appropriate worship and appropriate service of God. For us, we see this renewed covenant in Jesus. We receive a new covenant in the body and blood of Christ. This is the new covenant we remember when we take communion.

At Christmas, we remember that God reaches down to us so that we might be restored to the intimate relationship with God that was originally intended at our creation. It is only by God's initiative that this restored relationship is even possible. We could never deal with our own sinfulness sufficiently. Only through the grace of God reaching to us can we truly be restored.

I would like to close this morning with a story from the 1998 Harvard graduating class that gathered in Memorial Church to hear the late Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes give the unvarnished truth about going out into the world. He began: "You are going to be sent out of here for good, and most of you aren't ready to go. The president is about to bid you into the fellowship of educated men and women and, you know just – how – dumb – you – really – are. And worse than that, the world... [is] going to expect that you will be among the brightest and best. But you know that you can no longer fool all the people even some of the time. By noontime today, you will be out of here. By tomorrow, you will be history. By Saturday, you will be toast. That's a fact — no exceptions, no extensions.

"Nevertheless, there is reason to hope. The future is God's gift to you. God will not let you stumble or fall. God has not brought you this far, to this place, to *abandon* you or leave you here alone and afraid. The God of Israel never stumbles, never sleeps, never goes on sabbatical. Thus, my beloved and bewildered young friends, do not be afraid."⁴

This is our reminder for today. God is able to restore each of us to himself, through Jesus Christ who is the greatest gift for today and for the future. God's restoration is a guarantee for those who seek forgiveness and work towards wholeness that our current sinfulness will not be remembered into eternity. Christ frees us from eternal condemnation, even when earthly consequences still weigh on us. Holy God—come and fix our brokenness and restore us to a⁵right relationship with you, so that we can know you more fully and so that we might learn from your son, the Christ, who comes at Christmas. Amen.

⁴ Carey Goldberg, "At a Harvard rite, solace for seniors," *The New York Times*, June 5, 1998. nytimes.com. Retrieved July 26, 2018.