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### **Until the Dancing Begins Again**

I have been noticing (as we all have) that graduations are being cancelled and weddings are being postponed. Amid the virus is no time for assemblages of joyous celebration. In the time of the disaster of ancient Jerusalem Jeremiah noticed the same thing. Three times he observes that weddings are cancelled in Jerusalem because it is no time to celebrate and no time to bet on the future.

-In 7:34 Jeremiah notices the end of weddings as the corpses pile up:

The corpses of his people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the animals of the earth...And I will bring to an end the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for the land shall become a waste.

-In 16:9 Jeremiah notices that they are not even having funerals, leave alone wedding feasts:

Both great and small shall die... and no one shall lament of them; you shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them, to eat and drink... I am going to banish from this place, in your days and before your eyes the voice of mirth and the voice do gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride.

-In 25:10 Jeremiah anticipates that the land will become a ruin and a waste:

And will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride... This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste.

More than any other witness in the Old Testament, Jeremiah leans most deeply and most honestly into the disaster of his people. He takes the failure of social assemblies as a sign of the death of the city. When the city cannot assemble for rites of passage it is sure evidence that social life has failed. Indeed among us, it is only the foolish who insist on assembling, among them pastors who insist that Jesus will protect us from the virus. My pastor rightly calls such folk “knuckleheads.” Jeremiah could not even identify any such knuckleheads because the whole world of social possibility had been shut down.

Three times Jeremiah uses the odd term *hwn* that is rendered “bridegroom” only here in our texts and in Joel 2:16. (See its metaphorical use in the familiar texts of Psalm 19:5, Isaiah 61:10, 62:5). But then, belatedly, the prophet in his promissory utterance uses the term a fourth time in anticipation. This time he is able to envision a resumption of weddings as young people and their families are willing once again to bet on and invest in the future:

There shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord (33:10-11).

The prophet anticipates that in this place of waste, disaster, and devastation the sounds of festival celebration will again be heard. Life will resume in its rich social thickness. Amid the sounds of social gladness there will be songs of thank offering sung to the God who restores and revivifies.

Give thanks to the God of hosts,

for the Lord is good,

for his steadfast love endures forever (v. 11)!

This is Israel's most elemental doxology. (See the repeated doxological formula in Psalm 136). At its best Israel sings of YHWH's *hesed*, "steadfast love" that I have translated as "tenacious solidarity." This singing is the affirmation that God has not for an instant abandoned God's people or God's world, but has been abidingly faithful, even through the devastation. Thus the *doxology* of verse 11 follows the *restoration of weddings* in verse 10. And then verse 11 ends with the reiteration of Jeremiah's' favorite phrase of restoration, "Restore the fortunes." (See Jeremiah 29:14, 30:3, 18, 31:23, 32:44, 33:7, 27). This God has the capacity to restore, recover, and revivify! This is *the God of homecoming* after there was displacement. This is *the God of Easter* who has not quit, not even on that dread Friday or that misery-lasting Saturday. It is wonder that the older son in the parable heard "singing and dancing" (Luke 15:25). The reason for the singing and dancing is:

This brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found (v. 32).

The restoration can only be rendered in song and parable, two of the great trusts of the church!

This song of thanks that Jeremiah anticipates puts me in mind of the great German anthem of thanks, "Now Thank We All Our God." This best loved hymn of German Evangelicals was written by Pastor Martin Rinkart during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) as a table grace for his family. The notice I have on this work by Pastor Rinkart offers this startling awareness:

Martin Rinkart was pastor in Eilenburg, Saxony, the town of his birth. The walled city was a refuge for many fleeing war and pestilence. Left as the only clergyman in town, he often buried as many as forty or fifty persons in one day. Although his wife died of the pestilence, Rinkart survived (*A New Century Hymnal Companion: A Guide to the Hymns* ed. by Kristen L. Forman [Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998] 421.)

He wrote not only during the long-running war but in the face of pestilence that decimated the population as he presided over their many deaths. We do well to ponder this simple table prayer of gratitude amid pestilence:

Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices,  
who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices;  
who, from our mothers' arms, hath blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.  
O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,  
with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;  
and keep us in God's grace, and guide us when perplexed,  
and free us from all ills in this world and the next.

The context of his work, not unlike our own, was a scene of relentless death. Yet Rinkart wrote and sang of thanks! The hymn celebrates the “wondrous things” done by “this bounteous God.” We can picture pastor Rickard with his children counting out, one by one, “countless gifts

of love.” The hymn invites us to cling to God’s grace that “frees us of all ills” in all imaginable futures. The words are as sure, bold, and as awe-filled as is Israel’s best doxology in 33:11.

The rhetoric of Jeremiah, echoes by this German prayer-hymn, provides clues for our ministry now. We may identify two accent points that recur in this rhetoric. First is to engage in *relentless, uncompromising hope*. This is more than a civic assurance that “We will get through this.” It is rather the conviction that God will not quit until God has arrived at God’s good intention. There is a purpose at work in, with, under, and beyond our best resolves. That holy purpose is tenacious, steadfast, and relentless, that we and all of God’s creation will come to wellbeing. The task of the church is to hope in a way that is grounded in the good faithful resolve of God.

But the second task of ministry is the work in the meantime to be *witnesses to the abiding hesed (tenacious solidarity) of God* that persists amid pestilence. It is the witness of Jeremiah that in the midst of abandonment, God has not abandoned. Or to change the figure with Jeremiah, the seemingly barren wilderness is grace-occupied (31:2). That witness is performed by both word (at which we are pretty good!) and by act. The act is performed by neighborly gesture in a time of fear, by neighborly generosity and hospitality in a time of self-preoccupation, and by neighborly policies in the face of predatory greed. Who would have thought medical co-payments could be cancelled? Who would have anticipated the release of prisoners on reconnaissance? Who would have imagined that student debts and interest on those debts could be deferred? The work of the church is to empower and summon to such policies and to celebrate them as they appear among us. These new policies need not be aberrations for the sake of an emergency. They may indeed be the “new normal”!

The work of ministry is to render the virus as penultimate, to see that even its lethal force is outflanked by the goodness of God. Thus we have this simple witness of Pastor Rinkart with his willingness to sing and pray, even with death as close as his own household. Faith is indeed “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). That faith does not yield to death because it knows in the deepest ways that the goodness of God will not fold in the face of the threat of death. It boggles to know that that faith is entrusted to fallible folk like us. Jeremiah anticipated that the wedding, singing, and dancing would begin again, perhaps soon. In the meantime he waited with truth-telling honesty and courage.