

Jeremiah 31:7–14; Psalm 147:12–20; Ephesians 1:3–14; and John 1:(1–9), 10–18: NIV.

## Opening and Introduction (The world moved on. The church did not.)

Friends, it is January. The Christmas décor is coming down, routines are tightening, and we're already hearing the drumbeat of "back to normal." However, the early church, in her wisdom, says: **Not yet...** take a *last long look* at Christmas.

Why? Because we are not trying to get through the holidays, we are learning how to live because **God has come near**, and that nearness changes everything.

This Sunday is the **Second Sunday after Christmas**. And Epiphany is right around the corner (**January 6**), when the church will turn our attention to Christ revealed to the nations.

Nevertheless, before we go outward, we must go *deeper*: into Presence.

Here is the thread tying all our readings together:

- Jeremiah says God will **gather the scattered** and turn mourning into joy.
- Psalm 147 says God's **Word runs swiftly**, even through winter weather and frozen places.
- Ephesians says God's plan is to gather up all things in Christ, and to make a people "holy and blameless in love" (Ephesians 1:4).
- And John says the Word didn't merely speak: **the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.**

That!... is the Christmas experience: **presence before purpose**. If we reverse the order, the mission becomes an anxiety-driven activity. But, if we keep the order, mission becomes love on the move... steady, quiet, courageous.

## Jeremiah 31: God gathers the scattered—and He gathers the vulnerable

Jeremiah speaks to a people who know what it is to be **scattered**; they were exiled, lost, and dislocated. Furthermore, listen to the way God describes the gathering:

"I am going to bring them... and gather them... among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor" (Jeremiah 31:8).

That line matters. God's restoration doesn't begin with the impressive. It begins with the vulnerable: look at how Jeremiah piles image on image:

- "*brooks of water*" (Jeremiah 31:9).
- "*a straight path in which they shall not stumble*" (Jeremiah 31:9).
- "*their life shall become like a watered garden*" (Jeremiah 31:12).

And then the promise that feels like it was written for people carrying grief through the holidays:

*“I will turn their mourning into joy... and give them gladness for sorrow”* (Jeremiah 31:13).

Friends, Christmas is not denial. Christmas is God coming into reality. God doesn't shame the mourning of the next day; God **transforms** it... And notice: the gathering is not merely geographic. It's relational. God says: *“I have become a father to Israel”* (Jeremiah 31:9).

That's not just rescue. That's belonging.

## **Psalm 147: God's Word runs through winter—and melts what is frozen**

Now bring it home to Marion, Indiana; it is wintertime. Psalm 147 names the season we're in: *“He gives snow like wool... scatters frost”* ... *“He hurls down hail”* ... *“Who can stand before his cold”* (Ps. 147:16-17)?

Some of you can stand before it, but the rest are still asking why we do this on purpose. Nevertheless, the Psalm doesn't stop with cold.

*“He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow”* (Ps. 147:18).

That is a January word for the soul, because winter isn't only on roads. Winter happens in people: a frozen relationship, a frozen hope, a frozen imagination, a frozen faith that says, “I don't think anything can change.”

Psalm 147 says: God's Word runs swiftly, **and the same Word that names the cold also sends the melt.** So when you feel frozen, the question isn't, “How do I force myself to thaw?” The question is, “How do I stay near the Word who melts?”

## **Ephesians 1: The Gospel gives identity before it gives assignment**

Now Paul takes us to the heart of holiness. Listen carefully:

God *“chose us in Christ... to be holy and blameless before him in love”* (Ephesians 1:4).

That is holiness: not sterile perfectionism, not “better-than” religion, but **a life set apart by love.** Then Paul says something that can **re-parent** a nervous soul:

*“He destined us for adoption... and freely bestowed [grace] on us in the Beloved”* (Ephesians 1:5–6).

Before you do anything for God, the Gospel tells you where you stand:

- You are **in Christ**.
- You are **accepted**.
- You are **beloved**.
- You are **sealed** by the Spirit.

And then, this is the bridge back to Jeremiah, Paul says God's plan is:

*"to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth"* (Ephesians 1:10).

Jeremiah says God gathers the **scattered** people...

Ephesians says God gathers up **everything** in Christ...

That's Christmas: not God helping you manage life; what God is doing is **re-making** life around Jesus. N. T. Wright says Christian hope is not escape; it is God's **new creation**, "new heavens and new earth..." Already launched in Jesus, and energizing real work in the present.<sup>1</sup>

So, the next day matters... Monday matters... Your family system, your workplace, and your neighborhood matter. Because Jesus is not saving souls *from* broken creation, He is gathering a creation *into* renewal.

## **John 1: The Word doesn't merely speak—He dwells**

The next verse is from the Gospel of John; and he says something we should pay attention to:

*"He was in the world... yet the world did not know him" ... "He came to what was his own... and his own people did not accept him"* (John 1:10-11).

That means the meaning of Christmas can be missed. Not because it's unclear, but because it's unwanted or people are indifferent to it... Nevertheless, God has a lot of patience and he gives us the prevenience of His Grace:

*"to all who received him... he gave power to become children of God" ... "Children... born... of God"* (John 1:12-13).

That's the doorway. Receive him. And then, the line we cannot live without:

*"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14).

"Dwelt" is tabernacle language. God doesn't shout directions from heaven; God pitches His tent in the neighborhood.

Which means: God's answer to scatteredness is not first a program.  
God's answer is **Presence**.

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

Paul N. Anderson puts it in Friends-friendly language: we don't find our true needs met by "trying God" as a fix; rather, "only by... resting in God's presence do we find our true needs addressed."<sup>2</sup>

**That, my Friends, is Presence before purpose.**

### **Pastoral application: a January word for anxious systems**

Now, let me talk plainly about what January does to people. January often reveals what the holidays covered up:

- family triangles
- old patterns
- chronic stress
- spiritual fatigue
- the low-grade sense that you must "make it all work."

Bowen would call that **chronic anxiety** in the system—when everyone is reactive, fused, or cut off. In that kind of climate, people don't become holy; they become defensive.

Edwin Friedman once described churches like this: an "undifferentiated togetherness" that becomes "hyperconductive" for anxiety and "hyperreactive" in posture.<sup>3</sup>

Friends, that is not a word of condemnation; that is a diagnosis, so we can repent *accurately*.

So, what is the Gospel move? Well... **It is Not:** "Try harder to be calm."

➤ **But:** Receive the **Son.** Abide in **Presence.** Living from **belovedness.**

Holiness, then, becomes what I have been writing about for the last 5 years: **relational fidelity**, steady love, sustained presence, and Spirit-led truthfulness; you will have heard me call it: **Faithful Presence...**

One of my go-to's is Isaac Penington; he is Thomas Kelly, but 300 years earlier. Penington wrote a phrase that goes perfect with this message (or vice versa), this is why I like it for this Sunday:

"We are a people whom God hath converted to himself; a people in whom God hath raised up the seed of his own life..."<sup>4</sup>

That's not just poetry. That's identity. When the "seed of his own life" reigns, we stop living from anxiety and start living... **What might that look like this week?**

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<sup>2</sup> Paul N. Anderson, "A Theology of Presence" (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Penington, "A Brief Account of What We Are, and What Our Work Is in the World," in *Selections and Letters from the Works of Isaac Penington* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1837).

Let me put it in 3 simple invitations: Friends practice with Gospel clarity.

### 1. Practice Presence (silence that isn't empty)

Take 10 minutes a day this week. No structured prayers, just: "Lord Jesus Christ, teach me yourself." Sit until the noise settles enough to notice what is actually driving you.

### 2. Choose steadiness over reactivity

When the temperature rises: at home, online, in a meeting. Ask: "What would it look like for me to stay connected and not get hijacked?" That's not passivity. That's maturity.

### 3. Join God's gathering

In Jeremiah, God's gathering includes "the blind and the lame" (Jeremiah 31:8). So ask: who is scattered around me? Who is weary? Who feels unseen? Epiphany is coming. We will be sent. But we will be sent as people who have first been gathered.

## The Gospel invitation: Receive Him

Let's end this service where John ends the tension. The world may not know Him. His own may not accept Him. But **you can receive Him**. And receiving Him is not merely agreeing with ideas about Jesus. Receiving Him is opening your life to His life—so you become, by grace, what you could never manufacture: a child of God.

So, here's the invitation for this last long look at Christmas:

- Come home to Presence.
- Let the Word dwell.
- Let the Spirit seal.
- And let God gather what's been scattered in you.

## Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Word made flesh, we receive You again today.

Gather what is scattered in us—thoughts, loves, motives, fears.

Melt what has frozen in us—hope, joy, courage, tenderness.

Seal us with Your Spirit, and make us holy and blameless in love.

Teach us to be a steady people: not driven by anxiety, not mastered by the moment, but rooted in Your Presence: full of grace and truth.

And as Epiphany draws near, send us as those who have first been gathered; for the glory of the Father, in the power of the Spirit, and in the Name of the Son. Amen.