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The Prophet Jeremiah
IX. Radiant Over the Goodness of the Lord
Jeremiah 31:1-14

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

During the “stay-at-home” period of the Covid crisis, millions of people asked Google this question: “*Are the birds getting louder?*” And, of course, the birds weren’t getting louder. With everyone staying at home, we simply weren’t producing the level of noise pollution we are accustomed to – meaning that we could actually hear the sounds of the birds, which had been there all along.

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, in a recent sermon, was meditating upon that interesting by-product of those early Covid days – mainly because she was trying to meditate in the midst of our once again noisy, bird-song blocking world:

Anyhow, I thought about that whole are birds getting louder thing this week, because the other day I was trying to meditate – not so much out of piety as out of desperation. Like maybe if I could quiet my mind for a few minutes, I’d feel less wobbly. Maybe I could finish a sermon. Maybe I could finish a thought. And of course maybe this time I could finally become that imagined, improved version of myself.

So there I sat, 6:30 in the morning, windows open to draw in the cool air. And in from the window on my right came the relentlessly pounding, screeching, meditation-ruining construction noise from a six story apartment building going up behind our house. Immediately it stoked my rage at the years we’ve had to endure constant noise and closed lanes and trucks taking every parking spot just so some developer can make money they probably don’t even need. (The fact that I did not think a single thought about how six stories of apartments could help the Denver housing shortage proves why I need meditation to begin with.)

So . . . when the agitation subsided, I realized that from the window on my left came a very different, but quieter sound. From that side of the house streamed the delight and surprise of birdsong. In my right ear, deafening chaos of a construction zone, in my left the morning chimes of my feathered neighbors.

Two different sounds, happening at the same time. But when I focused on the grinding diesel engines, which was easy to do because they were so much louder . . . when I focused on them not only did my agitation return, but the birds seemed to just . . . disappear.

Of course the birds didn't disappear. I just literally couldn't hear them when I was tuned into something else.¹

* * * * *

The Israelites in exile in Babylon were experiencing something very similar in their ability to hear the voice of God through the deafening noise of the sorrow and loss and suffering of their exile. Actually the problem went back to the years leading up to their conquest by the Babylonians. They had been unable to hear the Lord God long before the exile, as He was calling them to repentance, calling them to turn back and come home to Him. They could not hear Him simply because the noise of their sinful rebellion was too loud and too proud in their ears for them to hear Him. They were tuned in, not to the plea of the prophets like Jeremiah, but to the profit – economic and otherwise – that they hoped to gain by their chasing after other gods, by their living like all the other peoples around them, in short by their rushing headlong into what they thought was a great adventure of self-determination rather than what it really was, which was a headlong rush into a living hell of their own making. God was speaking to them, pleading with them all along, like the constant song of the birds. But they could not hear. But they willfully chose not to hear.

And now that they have been conquered by the Babylonian Empire – Jerusalem sacked, the Temple torn down, the people carried off into exile – now that all this has come upon them, they again cannot hear God, cannot tune their ears to God. In part because their suffering was so deep – and suffering, as we well know, has a way of deafening our ears and our hearts to the presence of God and to the sound of His voice. In part because they were still not fully repentant, still not willing to tune their ears and their hearts back to the sound of God's Word. And maybe also, in part, because they were afraid that God was too angry with them – that the exile was proof that God was done with them – that God was so angry with them that they feared that if they turned their ears and hearts toward Him, all they would hear was silence, a vast empty silence where once their God had been.

But God, like the birds around us, was still speaking to them. And He wasn't speaking to them out of anger, but out of love. The exile was not, as they thought, the result of God hating them, being done with them – but rather was a proof of how much God loved them. It sounds contradictory, if not ridiculous – how could such suffering, their suffering in exile, be evidence of God's love for them? But God explained it to them. He told them that the exile was not His wrath, but His mercy; not His damnation, but their salvation. The exile was proof of God's love because it was proof that God would not let them destroy themselves by chasing after things which could only destroy them. Proof that God was willing to take drastic measures, if necessary, to keep them from falling away from Him into the abyss. The exile was God like a mother yanking back the arm of her child to stop that beloved child from running out into the path of an oncoming car. The exile was God breaking through all the noise of their sin to say to them, yet again, how much they mattered to Him, how much He cared about them, how much He loved them.

And so, what we read this morning from the prophet Jeremiah is nothing less than God writing to His people in exile one of the greatest love letters ever written – second perhaps only to the love letter which God wrote to us with the blood of His Son upon the cross. “*Thus says the Lord,*” the prophet speaks:

*Thus says the Lord:
 “The people who survived the sword
 found grace in the wilderness;
 when Israel sought for rest,
 the Lord appeared to him from far away.
 I have loved you with an everlasting love;
 therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.
 Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
 O virgin Israel!”*

“*I have loved you with an everlasting love,*” God says to His people in exile – and which God speaks now to His people gathered here this morning. “*I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*”

“*I have loved you with an everlasting love.*” A pastor tells of sitting in the house of a young couple in his church that he didn’t yet know very well. The husband was late arriving, so for a while it was just the pastor and the young wife – and a lot of awkward small talk between them. Then the wife left the room to go fix coffee for them. And while she was doing so, the pastor walked around the room admiring an impressive array of trophies won by the husband in athletic contests. When the wife came back in with the coffee, he said to her, “*Your husband must be a very good athlete and spend a lot of time on it.*” “Yes,” she said, “*he is very good. Why, it’s his second love.*” “*Second love?*” asked the pastor. “*What’s his first love?*” The pastor said she didn’t know him well enough to risk looking directly at him when she answered, but her shyness didn’t prevent her very confident answer: “*Me!*”

It was a wonderful answer. Here was a person who knew where she stood in a highly competitive world. Surrounded by signs of her husband’s love of sports, she was confident of her priority in his love. In a world in which others were constantly vying for his attention and his involvement, she was quietly sure of her place.

Do you know where you stand? You can know. God has made it clear that in fact you are first place. You are number one. He loves neither trophies nor games—he loves people. In a world filled with dazzling wonders (the trophies of creation) and made more complex with the excitement of games (the ways of the nations, the history of all people), God has a clear priority: to love you. You are his first love. The rest of it is his second love.²

“*I have loved you,*” God says to His exiles in Babylon, and says also to us this morning: “*I have loved you with an everlasting love.*” I remember the story one of my teachers, Dr.

Elizabeth Achtemeier, told about one of her teachers – the great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth. She said she was sitting in class listening to Barth as he read to the students a passage from his monumental work, the Church Dogmatics. When suddenly Barth paused in the middle of a sentence, looked up, grasped a strand of his disheveled white hair, and exclaimed – almost out of nowhere, just stopped and exclaimed, “There is not a lock of the hair on my head that is not infinitely interesting to God!”³ “*I have loved you*” – and so God also loves you and me – “*I have loved you with an everlasting love.*”

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” “The people who survived the sword and found grace in the wilderness” – that is God reminding His people of how He had faithfully heard their cries under the suffering of slavery in Egypt, and faithfully brought them forth in freedom through the Red Sea and across the desert sands. How He had faithfully kept them, preserved and provisioned them, led them through the wilderness for forty years; and then, at last, faithfully led them into a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. *“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.”*

And then God tells them – so fast and so wonderfully that they practically pile up on one another in a glorious, joyous heap – God’s promises to them that the exile is not the end of this story of His faithfulness to them, but that He is even now faithfully preparing for them a future that will be greater than anything they have ever known before, greater than anything they could ever imagine for themselves:

*Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel!
Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines
and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.
Again you shall plant vineyards
on the mountains of Samaria;
the planters shall plant
and shall enjoy the fruit . . .
Behold, I will bring [my people] from the north country
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth . . .
With weeping they shall come,
and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back,
I will make them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble . . .
For the Lord has ransomed Jacob
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord,
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall be like a watered garden,
and they shall languish no more.*

God is not done with His people. The exile is not the end. And so also our suffering is never the last word – because God is faithful in His everlasting love for us. And He will not cease His faithful working in us and for us until every heart, every life, every beloved son and daughter of the Most High God is made “*radiant over the goodness of the Lord.*” Is made radiant by the goodness of the Lord – that day when His Kingdom shall at last come. That day when we will all be gathered together again – like those exiles, gathered together from “*the farthest parts of the earth*” – gathered together again where there will be no more sorrow, no more tears, no more loss, no more death. But all will forever be made radiant over the goodness of the Lord. That day when:

*Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy;
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.
I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance,
and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness,
declares the Lord.*

“*I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*” Which means also, that on all the days in between exile and homecoming, all the days between this day and that great day still to come, we can know that the love of God is upon us right now, that the faithfulness of God is watching over us right now – guiding and guarding our every step along the way. God’s faithfulness to you and to me is not a now and then thing – it is a now and a minute from now and a tomorrow and always reality in which our lives constantly rest, and in which our souls may consistently and safely abide, God’s faithfulness. The noise of the world around us, the noise of the world within us may make it hard for us to hear Him as He moves in our midst, moves in our hearts, moves through this world with His saving purpose and power – but He is always there, always calling out to us in love, always looking out for us in His faithful care of us.

Glenn Tinder, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, tells of a friend who loves to hike alone in the Sierra foothills:

There were known to be mountain lions where he hiked. Mountain lions are mysterious, even mystical creatures. They are almost never seen, even in areas they inhabit. They are benign, for rarely do they attack human beings, although they are among the large predatory cats and can kill sizable animals in an instant; they also possess great beauty and grace.

I once asked my friend whether he had ever seen a mountain lion on any of his prospecting ventures. He said that he hadn’t. He said also, however, that often when he hiked into a mountain canyon, then late in the afternoon turned back, retracing his steps, he would find the tracks of a mountain lion near his own tracks, made earlier in the day. He would know that a mountain lion had been paying him close attention, even though he never saw the lion.

My friend's experience might serve as a parable of my own life with God. I can't claim ever to have had even a glimpse of God. When I look back on my life, however, I see his tracks all around the places where I have been.⁴

"He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock" – so God reassures the exiles whom He loves with an everlasting love, and whom He watches over and leads forth in constant faithfulness – *"as a shepherd keeps his flock."* *"The Lord is my shepherd,"* writes David, *"I shall not want . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*⁵ *"He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock."* Just as we therefore confidently sing in light of our Shepherd's everlasting love and constant faithfulness:

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come.
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.⁶*

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." And so: *"They will come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord."* Radiant, eternally radiant, over the goodness of the Lord who loves us with an everlasting and faithful love.

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "4 Ways to be a lousy Christian," sermon posted on-line July 12, 2026: [4 Ways to be a lousy Christian](#).

² Eugene H. Peterson, "Love Lessons: Love One Another, Just as He Has Commanded," in [Lights a Lovely Mile: Collected Sermons of the Church Year](#) (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2023), pp. 172-173.

³ Elizabeth Achtemeier, [Preaching as Theology & Art](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), p. 90.

⁴ Glenn Tinder, "Birth of a Troubled Conscience," [Christianity Today](#), Vol. 43, No. 5 (April 26, 1999), p. 38.

⁵ Psalm 23:1, 6.

⁶ Lines from John Newton's beloved hymn, "Amazing Grace."