

Mourning Into Gladness

This week's reading from Jeremiah is most meaningful to me when I read it in a larger context of Israel's cyclical history with Yahweh: "Whenever God slew them, they would seek him...Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath" (Ps 78.34,38). Over and over again, Yahweh holds back the big punishment, because he knows it will really hurt. But the time comes when he must stop holding back, and it is Jeremiah's sad duty to report on this breaking news:

"You have kindled my anger, and it will burn forever... I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses" (Jer 17.4,27). "I will completely destroy them and make them...an everlasting ruin" (25.9). Jeremiah sums up: "The LORD has given full vent to his wrath" (Lam 4.11).

There will be no more holding back; the discipline—painful though it may be—must go all the way until the job is done. "The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart" (Jer 30.24).

The punishment will hurt, but it will WORK. Because look at what happens after the eternal destruction of Jerusalem: "I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel" (31.3). Here we arrive at today's joyful Christmas text: "He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd... I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow" (31.10,13). "The days are coming...when this city will be rebuilt for me... The city will never again be uprooted or demolished" (31.38, 40).

Jesus' coming is good news, in part, because his presence demolishes us so that we can be rebuilt. It is not always a pleasant process, but it WORKS.

~ John Stonecypher