

### A Picture of the Church

<sup>7</sup> **This is what the Lord says:**

**"Sing with joy for Jacob;  
shout for the foremost of the nations.  
Make your praises heard, and say,  
'Lord, save your people,  
the remnant of Israel.'**

<sup>8</sup> **See, I will bring them from the land of the north  
and gather them from the ends of the earth.  
Among them will be the blind and the lame,  
expectant mothers and women in labor;  
a great throng will return.**

<sup>9</sup> **They will come with weeping;  
they will pray as I bring them back.  
I will lead them beside streams of water  
on a level path where they will not stumble,  
because I am Israel's father,  
and Ephraim is my firstborn son.**

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As you know, our 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary is next June, but we are spreading our celebration over tenth months, and each month we will focus on one of the symbols you find carved in the stonework above our main entrance. Two months ago we saw how the church is like a ship at sea. Last week we saw how the open Bible is a symbol of the church. Next week we will see the God the Fathers creating hand and how it is holding us even in death. In December we see how the star is a symbol of the church.

Today we have another symbol which is not carved in our stonework. Actually, it is not a symbol. It is a picture, a snapshot of what the Holy Christian Church looks like. Let's go back to our reading from Jeremiah and see what God's Church looks like.

<sup>7</sup> **This is what the Lord says: "Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations. Make your praises heard, and say, 'Lord, save your people, the remnant of Israel.'" This sounds like some awards banquet where the master of ceremonies introduces the main speaker and he says, "Let's give him a big hand," and the audience starts applauding.**

That is the scene we have in verse 7. The Lord is speaking to the entire world, all of creation, and he is telling everyone to start cheering for joy and singing songs of praise. Why? Because the Lord is saving his people. The Atlanta Braves won the World Series. I am sure they had a victory parade through Atlanta with tens of thousands of people cheering and throwing confetti. The world should cheer and throw confetti because there is a parade. It is parade of all those God saves.

I know, many people look with derision at Christian Churches. They think the world would be a better place without them. I also know others see 1800 denominations and accuse the church of inter-squabbling. But think about it. Wherever the cross is held high and the gospel of how God saves his people is preached, people should applaud. God is saving people. We applaud when first responders save lives. The world should applaud here too. Yes, I know, it is a remnant. The devil is certainly doing all he can to entice God's people away. But it is a miracle that anyone is saved and that is worthy of our praise. It is especially when we see who is all in that crowd.

<sup>8</sup> **See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return."** If I said this person is African, you will instantly picture what a typical African looks like. The same with American Indian or an Indian from India. We usually associate blond hair with Scandinavia. But look at this crowd. You can't identify it by ethnicity or hair color or skin color or language. That is because this crowd is perfectly diverse. Many are trying to emphasize diversity and inclusiveness. God achieves this goal as you see folks from every tribe, language and nation in this crowd.

Look closer. Notice what you do not see. You do not see triumphant soldiers in shiny armor riding on magnificent horses. You don't see any kind of strength or power in this crowd. You see only weakness. You see the diseased, the sick, the downtrodden, folks who are blind, lame, poverty stricken. This a group of broken, beaten people. It resembles a throng of refugees fleeing a war torn nation.

Notice also the pregnant women and those going into labor. If we were driving to Rapid City and my wife should go into labor, I would not continue the eight hour drive to Rapid City. I would immediately abandon that trip and break more than one traffic law to

rush her to the nearest hospital. Not in this throng. Folks who shouldn't be traveling will travel. Sounds rough, but this is a good thing. It means no one is left behind.

But look even closer at this crowd. <sup>9</sup>**They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back.**” You see them weeping. Could this be tears of joy that they are being saved? Certainly. But I think these are tears of sorrow as well. Look at this crowd. They are not innocent bystanders caught in the crossroads of war. They are the enemy. They are the rebels. They are the ones who started the war. When God moved Jeremiah to write these words, his nation, his people, were being dragged off into exile by the Babylonians because they had rebelled against God. Despite God's great patience and repeated warnings over the centuries, they abandoned God for other gods. They were unfaithful to their faithful Lord. No one should feel sorry for them. They were getting off easy.

Look at the folks who are Christians and make up the Christian Church. They are not the cream of the crop. They are not the good folks. They are the rebels. They are sinners, no better than other sinners. Go back to our reading from Acts. Remember how Peter pointed out how Jesus was proven to be God's Son and the Messiah? They had plenty of evidence in the miracles he performed. Yet, what did they do to him? They joined evil men to crucify him. I don't know if all of those thousands who were hearing Peter's sermon were there fifty-three days earlier chanting crucify him, but they all had a hand in his death. And this certainly was not what they were expecting from that sermon. Here they were, church going people who traveled hundreds of miles to be in Jerusalem that day to worship God. You think Peter would pat them on the back for their dedication. But he reminds them they are not that good. They helped to kill God's Son.

Well, we all did. As soon as Jesus took our place, as soon as our sin was laid on him, God poured out all of his fair, just anger over our sin on his own Son. He was punished because of our sins. So, no Christian can ever claim that he or she is innocent or better or not bad as others.

That is what we see these people in this crowd. It is full of sinners, rebels, God's enemies. But they were not being ushered to punishment or the gallows. They were being freed from exile. They were being saved because Jesus did die for them. Look at the road they were on. **“I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son.”** This is not some scene of folks trudging through the desert, parched, slowly dying of thirst. This is a scene of folks traveling a very pleasant and easy road. It has all you need. It has good and satisfying provisions to keep you well fed and nourished. There are no hills to tire you out, no boulders or obstacles to get in your way. It doesn't get any easier than this.

How easy is it to be saved by God? Easy. God does it all. The sins you committed? Jesus was punished for them. How about the holy life you need before God let's you into heaven? You don't have one, so God gives you the holy life of Jesus as your own. How smart do you have to be? Doesn't matter. It is ours by grace through faith so an infant or an Alzheimer patient can be saved.

And he tells us why. Because he is our Father. He is the perfect Father. He doesn't change his mind about us. That is why he sent them into exile, because as a loving Father he was discipling them so they are humbled and turn back to him. He does the same to us on any given day. That is why he is bringing them back, because he is their loving father.

I ask you, is this still the picture of God's Holy Christian Church? You bet. A snap shot of St. Paul's may be a little deceiving. We know and even joke about how many of us have German backgrounds. But who can blame us since so many of our ancestors came from Germany? But if you use a wide angled lens and include more than St. Paul's, you begin to see this picture more clearly. God's Church is worldwide. You can't identify it with any one language or ethnic background or culture. God told his Church to make disciples of all nations and it is happening. We are living examples of that.

Likewise, God's Church isn't full of strong, Alpha male types who withstand anything. On the contrary, we are the walking wounded. Each person, each family has its problems and issues. We are hurting. And God's Church is full of sinners. Look at us. We were once the enemy, the rebels who resisted God through sin. Now, look at God. As our Father, he calls us back to himself. He will even use hardship and trouble to get our attention and humble us when necessary. But he takes us back. He isn't leading us the slaughterhouse like some herd of pigs. He is leading us through a broken world into his Kingdom and his heaven.

Look at Christ. Though crucified, he lives again as the Scriptures and eye witnesses testify. We don't follow a dead leader. He is alive and well and is shepherding us through it all. Not even death can get in the way for he will give the command and the graves must release us.

Yes, there is only a remnant. That is sad. But it is a miracle that any of us are saved. And maybe that will move us to cling tighter to him, and maybe also to have sympathy for anyone who isn't part of this throng yet.

This is a picture of God's Church. It is a picture which includes us. Amen.