

Second Sunday after Christmas
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

CHRIST, THE TRUE ISRAEL

Genesis 46:1-7; I Peter 4:12-19; Matthew 2:13-23

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Het was not what Jacob expected. He had received the covenant from his father Isaac, had fled the land in fear of his brother's wrath from whom he had taken that covenant and blessing, and while fleeing had, in a vision, been promised that the land that he was leaving would become his possession and the possession of his off-spring. The Lord said to Him: "I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you." And the Lord had brought him back. Over the long years of exile, both Jacob and Esau had prospered. And when he returned, Esau having forgiven his brother, welcomed Jacob back with open arms. And now Jacob had lived in the promised land for some time and had fully expected to end his life there.

But now there was famine in the land and he had sent his sons into Egypt in order that he and his household might purchase enough food to live on until the famine ended. And, to make a long story short, there the sons of Jacob met their brother Joseph who now ruled the land in the name of the Pharaoh; and Joseph, whom Jacob loved more than any other of his children and whom he had thought dead long since, calls his father to come to Egypt. And Jacob goes. It was certainly not what he expected. He was an old man. Would he come back to the land of promise? Was he forsaking his birthright for good? Was this a faithful thing to do? You can imagine the conflict in his head and in his heart.

But once again the Lord speaks to him in a vision and says to him: "do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will put his hand on your eyes." Jacob, fleeing death by famine and longing to see his son again, goes to Egypt. And the Lord promises that though he is going to die there, the nation that will grow from his loins will become great and will inherit the land of promise.

And what became of Jacob's children? What became of Israel? They were not only saved from the famine, but they also did indeed grow into a mighty nation while dwelling in Egypt. And the Lord kept His promise to Jacob, and brought them out with a mighty hand and led them back into the Promised Land, where they were to be to Him a holy nation and a priestly people, a beacon of righteousness and a light to the whole world.

But Israel failed miserably. They were not faithful. Instead of showing forth the grace and righteousness of God to the world, they became just like the world in many ways. They forsook the Lord and took up the worship of idols. They rejected the Lord's leadership and demanded for themselves kings. They continued with a façade of religious ceremony and piety, but lacked true worship in that the nation lacked faith. And so the Lord eventually, after centuries of long suffering on His part,

drove them from the land into exile again, and though they were brought back, they never became the great and holy nation the Lord had intended them to be.

This holy Christmas season we celebrate the advent of Christ Jesus who is the promised Messiah and Savior, who is in His very person the new Israel and the fulfillment of all of the Lord's promises to Jacob and the patriarchs. And today we see Him who is born to be king of Israel, fleeing from the reigning monarch who has set out to kill Him in His infancy. Now it is not famine that drives the Head of the Nation into Egypt, but the madness and tyranny of Herod.

And yet this is not weakness on the part of the Holy Family or on the part of God. For the Lord sends His Son there that the prophecy of Hosea might be fulfilled. Now this prophecy speaks of two things, of the love of the Lord for Israel, and that in light of Israel's failings. It reads: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son. As they called them, so they went from them; they sacrificed to the Baals, and burned incense to carved images. I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by their arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them. He shall not return to the land of Egypt; but the Assyrian shall be his king, because they refused to repent. And the sword shall slash in his cities, devour his districts, and consume them, because of their own counsels. My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt Him."

It does not sound like a very promising prophecy, but then the Lord says: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel...? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man, the Holy One in your midst; and I will not come with terror. They shall walk after the Lord. He will roar like a lion. When He roars, then His sons shall come trembling from the west; They shall come trembling like a bird from Egypt, like a dove from the land of Assyria. And I will let them dwell in their houses, says the Lord." And now the Lion of Judah has come. The Lord Himself was now dwelling among them in the flesh of a helpless infant. And so the child is brought down to Egypt. And He does so that He might fulfill in His own life everything that Israel of old was to be, and thus atone for their failings and accomplish what they could not. Where they sacrificed to false gods, Christ would sacrifice all to keep the will of His Heavenly Father. Where they refused to see the hand of God blessing, guiding and keeping them; Christ saw and knew God's Word and work; received it and performed it faithfully. Where they refused to repent of their evil deeds, He did no evil, but rather preached repentance to the world. Where they were bent on turning away from God; He was bent entirely on faithfulness to His Father and kept His Word fully. Where they refused to exalt the Lord in their lives, His entire life was lived to the praise and glory of the Father. And no where do we see that more clearly than at the cross, where He out of obedience to His Father's will and out of love for all people, gives up His life and, never having sinned in any way Himself, atones for the sins of the whole world. And thus the sympathy of the Father is extended to Israel and to all mankind he has not come as a terror, but as a Savior. He does not come to destroy, but to build His holy nation.

And despite what you might hear from others, that holy nation is not the modern nation of Israel. So many have pinned their hopes on the success of this war-torn Middle Eastern country and on the liberation of Jerusalem from Islam and on the rebuilding of the Temple and such. But these things have nothing to do with our faith or with Christ's nation. His nation is not the political entity we see on the news each night. It is the Israel of His holy Church, the people of faith.

And in Christ's Church the Lord's promises to Jacob are fulfilled: "you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed." And so the Church has filled the whole world and people from all tribes and nations have come into it and continue to come into it by the grace of Christ and through the call of His Gospel. Yes, in Him who is the Seed of Jacob, all of the families of the earth have been blessed.

And we have been blessed with them. We have been called by Christ into the new Israel of His Church. We are now part of His holy and priestly nation. We have been baptized. We have been cleansed of all of our sins and are saved. We too have escaped a certain death, not by famine or by tyrant, but by sin. And though we still carry sin within us and still act in sinful ways at times, the grace of Christ still flows to us and enlivens and forgives.

How then should we live? Should we be like Israel of old whom though chosen by the Lord, find themselves condemned for their unbelief? Or should we live in faith? The answer is abundantly clear; but what does that mean? It means living in repentance and in the confidence of Christ's love and mercy toward us. It also means exalting the Lord God in our lives, and living as beacons of His righteousness, of His love, and of His grace toward our world.

But so often we are much more like the old Israel than the new. We fail too. And yet as God refused to forsake them; so He now refuses to forsake us. He continues to call us to repentance and to faith, and He continues to shed His grace upon us through His Holy Word and by His sacraments that we might be strengthened, and that the beacon of our faith might be made to shine with a light that is not our own. Let us continue to faithfully hold on to the Word of Christ, as Jacob of old did; and may His light continue both to shine upon us and in us. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧