

“A Smooth, Uncluttered Path”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

January 4, 2026

⁷ For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, “Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel.”

⁸ See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. ⁹ With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.”

¹¹ For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. ¹² 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 become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:7-14)

Each year, at midnight on New Year’s Eve, we all experience a notable pivot point. We turn away from the year that has been and turn to face a new year to come. It is a powerful moment, because regardless of what the past year has brought, regardless of what might be happening in our lives or in the world, there is hope in that moment – hope for a fresh start... hope that in the coming year we might do things a little better... that we might be a little better. It is a pivot from regret to optimism... from shame to hopeful possibilities.

For example, in the very early days of 1936, in the syndicated newspaper column written by Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady was clearly disturbed by a recent Supreme Court decision that threatened to cripple a program helping the working poor in the midst of the Great Depression. But instead of giving into despair, her column described the hope that her family was feeling as a new year began. As everyone went to sleep the night after the decision, the words they shared were "Good night, sleep well, pleasant dreams. With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts."¹

It is the same message brought by the prophet Jeremiah, who is writing to a nation that had been suffering through a long and discouraging period of defeat, occupation, and exile. For page after page, the first 29 books of the prophet’s message were all gloom and doom. The prophet detailed the many sins of the nation, focusing intently on God’s anger about the lack of faith and commitment of the people. It is a tale of separation and brokenness – a story of countless families broken apart by invasion and tyranny.

And then, all of the sudden, the prophet pivots in Chapter 30. Like a piece of music shifting from a dismal minor key into a major one, the tone of judgment and punishment

¹ My Day, January 8, 1936, https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1936&_f=md054227



shifts into a more hopeful melody. God has heard the pleas and felt the pain of the people, and something new and wonderful is on the horizon.

We hear that good news clearly in this morning's passage. The families that had been broken apart are about to be reunited. Their painful separation is about to end. "*See, I am going to bring them [home],*" God says through the prophet, "*and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth.*" The blind, the lame will return to the city of their birth. Pregnant women will not have to bear their children in a foreign land. Everyone – "a great company" the scripture says – will return home with tears of joy and gratitude in their eyes. God's anger is no more, those who had been lost will be found, and they will come home to nothing but love.

The metaphor Jeremiah uses for this return is one that was also found in the Psalms and employed by his contemporary Isaiah. I will lead them "*by brooks of water,*" Jeremiah writes, "*in a straight path in which they shall not stumble.*" This is the hope we raised back during Advent – the prophetic voice calling out in the wilderness to "*prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. [Because] every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain... and all people will see it together.*"² This is Jeremiah's vision of that same highway – full of broken people coming home, broken families being healed.

I love the way that Eugene Peterson translates the Hebrew in his version of the Bible known as *The Message*. The voice of God calls out with grace and love: "*Watch them come! They'll come weeping for joy as I take their hands and lead them... lead them to fresh flowing brooks, lead them along smooth, uncluttered paths.*"³

A smooth, uncluttered path. That is one of the promises of Christmas. Yes, Christmas is about the birth of a Savior who offers salvation to sinful individuals. But the prophetic vision and the divine promise are so much broader than that. The promise of Christmas is a promise for all people – a reality that we will all see together and experience together – the prospect of a world where all the thorns that snag us and cut us as we walk through each day... all the dangerous paths we have to walk over treacherous mountains that trip us up and break our bones... all the dark valleys where danger lurks and death feels close... all those treacherous trails become smooth, uncluttered paths. The incarnation of Christ, in the name of God who is truly with us, clears the way for a joyful homecoming, a blessing that can be shared by all people everywhere.

It is easy for this hopeful vision to get lost in a thicket of disillusionment or cynicism. We are not used to smooth, uncluttered paths. We are much more familiar with tough, rocky climbs and dark, scary valleys. We bear the bruises and scars of too many stumbles, the painful memories of too many lost dreams, the failed expectations of too many failed resolutions. So it is easier for most of us to see the obstacles in our way than it is for us to see the possibilities that lie ahead.

But as another new year's hopeful, the poet T.S. Eliot, once wrote: "Last year's words belong to last year's language. And next year's words await another voice." So, let us leave our words about the dry, barren life of exile in the past. Let us speak instead of life that thrives "like a watered garden." Instead of wallowing in the brokenness of the past, let us "rejoice in the dance." Let us pivot into a new, more hopeful key, and give voice to new

² Isaiah 40:3-5.

³ Jeremiah 31:9 (*The Message*).

words that trust in God's promise: *"I will turn your mourning into joy... I will comfort you, and give you gladness for sorrow."*

In this season of Christmas, as a new year begins, we find ourselves at an important pivot point, when even the most cynical of us are able to pause as the ball drops and open ourselves to hope that this year, things might be different. At the beginning of 1936, it was easy for the Roosevelts to see the problems. For most Americans, the road ahead looked rocky. They were still deep in the dark valley of the Great Depression. What they did not know was that, in the coming year, light would begin to break in the darkness. The economy would soon begin to grow... employment would soon begin to rise. But none of that was visible as the new year began. Still, the family left the door open for optimism.

In like manner, let's rest our spirits. Let's think good thoughts and dream pleasant dreams. Depending on where you sit, the road may look rocky and you may feel buried in clutter. But Christ is born, God is with us, and the Spirit's promise is that smoother paths lie ahead.

With this new day comes new strength and new thoughts. ***Amen.***