

Welcome

What are your favorite comfort foods?

Mine is a very high brow dish we call “Corn Dip”. It was a treat my family had once a year growing up - only on Christmas Eve.

The recipe for corn dip is pretty esoteric. You need one log of cream cheese, one log of Monterrey jack (pepper jack, if possible) and a can of corn.

You cook the corn in butter, then melt the cheeses. Once it's all melted together, you serve with nacho cheese Doritos.

What does this dish have to do with Christmas?

Nothing, as far as I can tell.

Where did it originate?

No idea, though based on the fact that it's all fat and carbs, definitely the Midwest (where I grew up).

I love corn dip. It's my comfort food because when I eat it, I'm instantly transported back to those Christmas Eve nights with my siblings and my parents, the joy and anticipation of the next morning burning bright as we scooped gooey dip into our mouths with cheesy, crunchy goodness.

Now that I'm an adult with my own bank account, I can make corn dip whenever I want. But I still try to make it only once or twice a year. Not just because it's not the *healthiest* food choice. No, because even though it's a very plain dish that takes almost no skill to prepare, it's special *to me*. It's sacred, in its own way.

So what's your comfort food? What reminds you of that space you're safe, secure and free to hope?

We're going to hear one of the great comfort poems of the Bible today, and we'll explore how God uses images and ideas from long ago to speak comfort to a people in turbulent times.

Hope, after all, isn't for the good times. Hope is what we need in the hard times.

Message

We've spent the last two months exploring what it looks like to be Black Sheep in our current reality. Not because we're alienated from the larger culture, but from the Church. Growing up, you felt distance from the Church because you were drifting from faith. Today, though, a lot of the folks who are feeling this sense of isolation, of being the weird one - it's not because of weak faith. It's actually the opposite

And it's not because they're drifting or backsliding or wandering from their faith. It's actually our faithfulness *to* Jesus that's making us feel like outsiders to our own faith. The people who claim to represent Jesus don't actually look very much like him.

[**Timeline**] That's why we've spent the last couple of months with the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in the years leading up to the Exile, one of the most apocalyptic and formative events in the history of God's people. Jeremiah was born into a world in the shadow of the Babylonian Empire, and the little nation of Judah spent decades trying to figure out how to survive Babylon. They made payments to the emperor to keep him from conquering them. They entered into alliances with other nations.

This was the big point of contention, because these alliances involved adopting the other nations' gods - a sort of cultural exchange. This idolatry was a violation of the covenant between God and God's people. It was a signal that God's people didn't trust that God's way would preserve them, protect them and provide for them. The people continued to give lip service to God, but their actions showed they preferred to trust the power of the nations around them.

Sound familiar?

This series has been challenging for us, in large part because we know where Jeremiah's story went - the people didn't listen to his warnings, and they endured the Exile. As we consider the idolatry we see in our own culture, we've had to ask the same: is Christianity in our time and place on the same trajectory?

Turn with us to [Jeremiah 31](#).

Today is the conclusion of our series, and we're ending in a part of Jeremiah scholars call the 'Little Book of Comfort'. We're ending this series in a place of hope. We're going to see today that God uses the deep history of God's faithfulness to the people as a way to reassure those in the midst of crisis that God remains with them. Let's begin with a glimpse at the tone of the passage. Read the first two verses with me:

"In that day," says the Lord, "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people. This is what the Lord says: "Those who survive the coming destruction will find blessings even in the barren land, for I will give rest to the people of Israel." -- Jeremiah 31:1-2 (NLT)

There's a temptation with passages like this to take a deep breath and say, "Oh, okay. Everything's gonna be okay. God is in control. We can just relax."

Have you seen that? In the midst of political turmoil, Christians shrug and say, "God is in control," or "Everything's going to work out in the end." It's a way of shrugging our shoulders and hiding from the real pain and problems in our world. In the worst versions, it's a way of hiding from *our own roll* in creating the circumstances that are now so dangerous.

How do God's promises steady us as we live faithfully in the here and now? How can we use hope as the fuel for our faithfulness *knowing* that, like Jeremiah, we'll be ignored and even rejected or ridiculed?

I want to work through God's promises here and reflect on what we've seen is our role over the last several months. So let's begin with verse 3:

Long ago the Lord said to Israel: "I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself. -- Jeremiah 31:3 (NLT)

1. Rooted in God's Love

We began our journey by insisting that we must be rooted in God's love. And here, we find a powerful reaffirmation of God's love for us. God loved us - and by 'us' we don't mean here just the faithful few, remember? God loves all of God's people - even the faithless and idolatrous. And God has loved us for much, much longer than we could possibly have loved God.

God's love is an everlasting love. It's eternal, unending. There's nothing we can do, as Paul says in his letter to the Roman church, to separate ourselves from God's love.

2. God as Source

In the second week, we looked at the reality of idolatry - how often we look to something other than God for our life, for protection and provision. But God reminds the people that God is our source. God draws us to Godself with 'unfailing love' - that's that Hebrew word *chesed* we've seen a couple of times in this series. It means God has obligated Godself to us. By creating us, by loving us, God has committed Godself to us in a real, binding way.

One thing that means is that God is a never-ending source of living water - life itself to which we have eternal access. Why would we build leaky rain catchers instead of drinking freely from God's infinite love?

3. Freedom not Shame

Of course the sad reality is that we *all* turn to idols. We're all guilty of building cracked cisterns, leaky rain catchers, rather than receiving God's love freely. Ashley reminded us that when we're confronted with this reality - when we see that we're much more like idolatrous Israel than we like to admit, our tendency is to hide, or simply collapse in shame.

But God's *chesed*, God's unfailing love, lifts us up. God's love does not create *shame*, but freedom. God's love isn't condemnation but liberation.

These three are foundational to the Black Sheep's faithfulness. We're grounded in God's love. We're aware of and watchful for idolatry in ourselves and the people around us. And we're not interested in judgment or condemnation but in liberation.

SONG

We must be grounded in God's love to hear what comes next. Because many words in this series were hard for us to hear. It's only appropriate, then, that even here, especially here, God's promises sustain us:

I will rebuild you, my virgin Israel. You will again be happy and dance merrily with your tambourines. Again you will plant your vineyards on the mountains of Samaria and eat from your own gardens there. -- Jeremiah 31:4–5 (NLT)

4. No Feast, No Fast

God warned the prophet against pretending everything is normal when it's decidedly not. For Jeremiah, this looked like withdrawing from funerals and weddings, fasts and feasts. For us, it's meant the end of relationships both individual and communal.

So God promises that these painful endings are not The End. Weddings will resume. Feasts will return. Days of celebration are ahead.

In other words, God is rebuilding. The Black Sheep who have experienced the real pain of loss can trust that the God of the Exodus and the Exile will create new life and new spaces for that life to flourish.

In fact, this promise is how we can continue to trust, to risk despite the real relational pains our faithfulness has caused. God is still at work, so we can choose to continue to meet God in that work.

Part of that risk comes in choosing to risk continuing to worship together. Another promise God makes is the restoration of true worship among God's people:

The day will come when watchmen will shout from the hill country of Ephraim, 'Come, let us go up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord our God.' "

Now this is what the Lord says: "Sing with joy for Israel. Shout for the greatest of nations! Shout out with praise and joy: 'Save your people, O Lord, the remnant of Israel!' -- Jeremiah 31:6–7 (NLT)

5. Worship as Key

We saw how Sabbath was maybe *the* key practice for God's people, and it was one they had allowed to fall by the wayside. The nations around them worked seven days, so they did too. We know that struggle all too well - few if any of us have anything like what we could identify as a real Sabbath practice.

So we heard the prophet's call for Black Sheep not to forsake worshiping together, even if it means seeking out those other faithful Black Sheep who believe God is still working to bring good and beauty in our world.

We worship in *hope* that what we do here continues to matter, that future generations will look back on our faithfulness here with gratitude for the possibilities God created through our faithfulness. We worship to plant seeds future generations of faithful will reap.

Let's continue reading:

For I will bring them from the north and from the distant corners of the earth. I will not forget the blind and lame, the expectant mothers and women in labor. -- Jeremiah 31:8 (NLT)

A great company will return!

6. Lament is how we Listen

Sonya reminded us that feeling paralyzed and overwhelmed is normal in the face of such faithless times. She took us to Lamentations, the book Jeremiah (probably) wrote to comfort those who endured the Exile. Sonya reminded us that choosing to stay with grief is how we unlearn the painful habits of idolatry. It's how we learn to listen to the voices of the most vulnerable, those our idols teach us to ignore.

So it should come as no surprise that Jeremiah's vision of restoration comes with a promise to include all those vulnerable God's people had been overlooking. Black Sheep know that unless the people includes *all* the people, they're not truly God's people.

Tears of joy will stream down their faces, and I will lead them home with great care. They will walk beside quiet streams and on smooth paths where they will not stumble. For I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my oldest child. -- Jeremiah 31:9 (NLT)

7. Have You Any Wool?

Last week, we saw that God holds leaders responsible. That through Jesus, God gave us a good shepherd, a leader to show us how we should live in the world. To be a Black Sheep congregation is to be a people who leads with love, serving the most vulnerable in our midst. Jesus is our anchor and our hope.

Communion + Examen

We gather in hope, trusting that resurrection is for all of us.

How has God spoken to me during this series?

How have I ignored God's call in the last month?

How have I responded positively to God's call in the last month?

What does faithfulness in the next month look like?

Assignment + Blessing

The church's reputation - BAD!

Black Sheep church will once again be the norm. (Series preview)

"Listen to this message from the Lord, you nations of the world; proclaim it in distant coastlands:

The Lord, who scattered his people, will gather them and watch over them as a shepherd does his flock. For the Lord has redeemed Israel from those too strong for them. They will come home and sing songs of joy on the heights of Jerusalem. They will be radiant because of the Lord's good gifts—the abundant crops of grain, new wine, and olive oil, and the healthy flocks and herds.

Their life will be like a watered garden, and all their sorrows will be gone. The young women will dance for joy, and the men—old and young—will join in the celebration.

I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them and exchange their sorrow for rejoicing. The priests will enjoy abundance, and my people will feast on my good gifts. I, the Lord, have spoken!" -- Jeremiah 31:10–14 (NLT)