

Course correction: Jeremiah 31:7-14

by [Barbara Sholis](#) in the [December 18, 2002](#) issue

My friend Glenn has a poet's heart. We regularly meet to talk and he often ends our visits by reading a poem he has written or one he has found that speaks to him. I was not very interested in poetry until Glenn began sharing poems with me. Over time, however, I have grown not only to appreciate but to crave poetry. The wall behind my office desk is beginning to look like the walls of John Nash's garage in the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. It is peppered with lines and verses, for I can hardly stand to part with poems that profoundly touch me. Billy Collins's "On Turning Ten," Anne Stevenson's "The Minister," Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child" reach down into places where mere prose cannot reach: places of exile, places that mark the path toward home.

Like a compass for an explorer or a weathervane for a farmer, poems advise of a change—be it a course correction or an atmospheric shift. I agree with Bill Moyers, who says that poetry is the most honest language he hears today. Poetry is the instrument of the prophet. If you want to discover the real news of the day, turn off the cable news networks and take a trip to your bookshelf or the local library and read some poetry. Poetry exposes truth and stays anchored to it.

The poetic imagery of Jeremiah invites us to sit with this text's recurring dance of reversal and triumph. In it we rediscover one of scripture's principal themes: the story of God's grace and compassion triumphing over God's judgment. Embedded in the songs, hymns and laments of God's people is the origin of blessing. Through the prophet Jeremiah, we discover our own place and time in this dance with God.

But trouble starts when we forget we have a dance partner and begin to make up our own steps. Before we know it, we are dancing solo. Today's reading from Jeremiah begins not with celebration but with the warning to turn back to the Lord.

That is what Walter Brueggemann calls "the power to remember—the freedom to forget." So desperate is poor Jeremiah (in chapter five) that he's forced to run through the streets of the town searching for one person, one person who acts justly and seeks truth so that God will call this whole judgment thing off. "No evil will come

upon us” is the collective response. “The prophets are nothing but wind.” “The Lord will do nothing.”

That was, of course, before the exile. Stephen Shoemaker writes that “exile was (and is) a time of captivity and chastening, of figuring out what went wrong and why, a time of gestations, of waiting, of singing the Lord’s song in a strange land, a time of hoping in what we cannot see.” Exile is a time for the language of honesty, for the sentiments of the prophet/poet.

Yahweh ultimately calls the children of Israel out of exile and back into the fullness of love. God reverses God’s own ways, but always with God’s timing and not before those returning from exile remember what it was that they have forgotten. All is made new in a story that has revealed itself through the ages.

Thomas Merton wrote that “no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.” We cannot, even through our own sinfulness, stain this joy. We are reminded of our own holy dance with God when the minister, after baptizing an infant, saunters down the center aisle of the sanctuary and reminds those gathered to “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” The child in his arms, presented with all the hope of promise and of blessing, reminds us of the grace declared to us in our own baptism. “A blessing,” writes Rachel Remen, “is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another.”

Jeremiah initiates a course correction. He is calling those who remember their relationship of blessing with Yahweh back into the living of it. I am bringing you home, God says. In contrast to their departure, a journey filled with brute force and destruction, those returning now are part of the procession of the restored. The weeping refugees shall return home with prayers in their hearts; the blind and the lame shall know their place in the kingdom. Mothers carrying their babies will walk alongside mothers in labor. It is a time pregnant with promise, and a time for noisy tambourines and merry dancing. All will participate in the spirited homecoming parade. God will lead everyone to new beginnings filled with new life.

When the celebration ends and life returns to the holy rhythm of the ordinary, we are tempted to store our tambourines on the top shelf of the closet and place our

dancing shoes beneath the bed. Jeremiah cautions us not to misplace those dancing shoes. For at a moment's notice, the band can strike up and God, our Holy Partner, will beckon us to dance. Life's greatest gift is to dance with God and remember what it is to live life as blessing.