

**1.5.25 ~ Christmastide 2**  
**“God’s Purposeful Wisdom”**  
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Jeremiah 31:7-14** <sup>NIV</sup>

<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.

<sup>10</sup> “Hear the word of the Lord, you nations;  
proclaim it in distant coastlands:

‘He who scattered Israel will gather them  
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.’

<sup>11</sup> For the Lord will deliver Jacob  
and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

<sup>12</sup> They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;  
they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—  
the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,  
the young of the flocks and herds.

They will be like a well-watered garden,  
and they will sorrow no more.

<sup>13</sup> Then young women will dance and be glad,  
young men and old as well.

I will turn their mourning into gladness;  
I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

<sup>14</sup> I will satisfy the priests with abundance,  
and my people will be filled with my bounty,” declares the Lord.

**Leader: These Words of Prophecy Are from God.**

**All: Thanks be to God!**

**Ephesians 1:3-14** <sup>GNT</sup>

*Spiritual Blessings in Christ*

<sup>3</sup> Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! For in our union with Christ he has blessed us by giving us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly world. <sup>4</sup> Even before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be his through our union with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him.

Because of his love <sup>5</sup> God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would make us his children—this was his pleasure and purpose. <sup>6</sup> Let us praise God for his glorious grace, for the free gift he gave us in his dear Son! <sup>7</sup> For by the blood of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God, <sup>8</sup> which he gave to us in such large measure!

In all his wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ. <sup>10</sup> This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head.

<sup>11</sup> All things are done according to God's plan and decision; and God chose us to be his own people in union with Christ because of his own purpose, based on what he had decided from the very beginning. <sup>12</sup> Let us, then, who were the first to hope in Christ, praise God's glory!

<sup>13</sup> And you also became God's people when you heard the true message, the Good News that brought you salvation. You believed in Christ, and God put his stamp of ownership on you by giving you the Holy Spirit he had promised. <sup>14</sup> The Spirit is the guarantee that we shall receive what God has promised his people, and this assures us that God will give complete freedom to those who are his. Let us praise his glory!

**Leader: Paul's Words of Wisdom Are from God.**

**All: Thanks be to God!**

**Please pray with me:**

All knowing God, we come this first Sunday of the new calendar year grateful for the Christmas and New Year's holidays, gifts given and received, goals set, and relationships and intentions renewed. We submit our worship today wholly to you so that we may receive your direction and encouragement for the new year before us. Many circumstances sadden or bewilder us so we need your presence even as we study. Open our hearts to hear your voice in this message. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Happy New Year! I hope you are ready for this huge winter storm that's coming our way tonight. Weather.com says 9 inches are predicted for Annandale! Chris and Caribbean Services are ready to plough, but chances are we'll be closed tomorrow. If we have power, I'll be working from home remotely, but *The Vision* newsletter may be late going out this week! Keep everyone in prayer for their safety and wellbeing.

During Advent we were in four weeks of preparation to receive the Messiah's birth at Christmas. For children, it seems like an eternity! We prepared spiritually and physically for the holidays, and we should do the same sort of preparation for the week before the New Year, but we often don't. I suggest that we use this first month of the year as more prep time for 2025. This does not mean living in the past or hesitating to move forward into the year ahead, by no means! We must live in the present, but as you've reflected on last year over the recent weeks, are you preparing your intentions or your focus for 2025? Over the last ten years, it has been my practice to choose a word or short phrase for the new year, much like I pray about and choose a theme for our church calendar year. It helps us focus on goals and forward movement. Some personal examples for me in the past were "courage, stamina, contemplation, motivation, joy, love, forgiveness, family, momentum, giving." Having one word each year became my north star if I became distracted by life circumstances. Try it! But first pray about it, jot several down, and you'll know when you've landed on the right one.

For today's sermon, the word is wisdom, God's wisdom, but it may not be evident at first reading of our scriptures. The Jeremiah passage context is a homecoming of sorts, with joy and dancing, abundant fields and fruit trees, plentiful grain, oil, wine, and flocks of livestock. The prophecy is helping to prepare the people who've been in exile in Babylon for a hopeful return to Jerusalem, even though it's been destroyed. Like our Advent, humans must prepare psychologically, spiritually, and then physically. In this passage, the Israelites' restoration and deliverance would be joyful, praising God as he gathered his people

from everywhere they dispersed and in whatever condition they ended up. Restoration and redemption are Jeremiah's words for this homecoming. He says there will be level paths or roads, and they will experience enough crops and flocks to thrive, not just survive as they did in exile. There will be endless blessings that bring comfort, joy, and gladness. Didn't we sing of that at Christmas? A different context, Jesus' birth, yet the same message of hope. The words of comfort and joy are used in the refrain of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen:"

<sup>1</sup> God rest you merry, gentlemen,  
 let nothing you dismay,  
 remember Christ our Savior  
 was born on Christmas Day  
 to save us all from Satan's pow'r  
 when we were gone astray.

*Refrain:*

O tidings of comfort and joy,  
 comfort and joy;  
 O tidings of comfort and joy.

In the Lectionary, there are two other entries for today: the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach. In Christianity, the name "Apocrypha" applies to a set of books from oral and written history that took longer to determine their canonicity or authenticity, and are recommended for private study, not public reading. However, the Roman and Orthodox faiths include them as legitimate authors and part of the Bible. When they appear, they are often placed between the Old and New Testaments, and for our purposes today, they are considered "Wisdom literature," and might be called another "messenger" as per our Advent series.

The writer of the Wisdom of Solomon (10:14-21) elevates Israel as a holy people and recounts many of God's actions both saving and

punishing ones like Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, all wise men in difficult, life-threatening circumstances. The details are accurate compared to the canonical books in the Bible. In Sirach 24:1-12, similar to the feminine words used in Proverbs, we meet “Wisdom” as a female with divine characteristics, closely aligned with the Torah, and she dwells everywhere from the heavens to the earth and seas, in the temple, or in the city of Jerusalem. As the apostle Paul does in his letters, both apocryphal entries deduce that Christ is God’s sacrifice and wisdom; Christ unites Jews and Gentiles through adoption and redemption. The mystery of God’s will is seen through Christ who was made with the holy seal of the Holy Spirit. His grace and salvation are an inheritance. Our **acceptance** of that grace and salvation are his wisdom influencing us.

It is fitting to study the calling of the church after last week’s study of personal callings and on the first Sunday of the calendar year. As Paul does in his letter to the Ephesians, we too praise God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whose birth we just celebrated. Paul’s words “spiritual blessing” is “*eulogia*” in the Biblical Greek, and asks what the blessings are for, for whom, where given, and how blessed. That is a bit like a funeral eulogy: a testimony of the loved one’s faith like we saw given at the Jimmy Carter memorial in Atlanta yesterday: Christian hymns were sung, and relatives shared the how, when, and why he blessed others by his work and social contributions, like Habitat for Humanity and his World Peace work.

For Paul and for us, let us always remember that God’s purposeful wisdom graces his believers with forgiveness of sins, free will, deep insight, the supernatural and physical mystery of existence, hope in

Christ, salvation, and mercy for all his chosen ones. Jeremiah's list was more practical about sustenance and provision, and there are many more blessings from God than we've discussed today. All of these readings show that God's blessings and his wisdom are part of the bigger purpose of God as it existed before the creation itself, and before our creation as human beings. God's grand design was and still is to unite all things in him, both heavenly and earthly. Why? Because he loves us. God withholds **nothing** that could enrich our lives, either earthly blessings or heavenly ones. Yes, there is occasional punishment, but it is instructional, not vindictive. All his blessings convey the **good** of God, who chose us as his own, out of his unconditional love. He did this for the Israelites many times over despite their disobedience or rebellion. If we accept this love and wisdom, we will surrender, trust, and obey. Let us think about these things as we choose a word for 2025! Christ is with us, Emmanuel! Christ will come again in glory! Amen? Amen! ||

**Let us pray.** Omniscient God, we thank you today and every day for your spiritual blessings and gifts of love and wisdom. We thank you for sending your son to save us from ourselves. Please open our hearts personally and as a church to answer your call for 2025. May your purposeful wisdom fill our minds, our life decisions, our homes, and our relationships, drawing us together in action. Be with us now as we celebrate in memory the Lord's last supper with his disciples. We ask you to bless these elements for us to share in community. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.