**Jeremiah 31:31-34** March 21, 2021

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*Jeremiah 31:31“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. 32It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’” declares the Lord. 33“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. 34No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**The New Covenant**

Do you know anybody who has ever come back from town with bags full of stuff from a dozen different stores, flopped it all on the table and said, “Honey, do you know how much money I saved?” We love new stuff, especially if we feel it is a good deal. Don’t think I am picking on the female audience, guys may not stop at a dozen stores, but they love new stuff too—power tools, right guys?

A new deal gives us the same feeling. If you had an old home loan at 6, 7 or 8%, and were able to refinance in the last few months, you love the thought of saving money month after month after month. A great new deal like that makes us feel so empowered, so in-charge.

Sometimes, however, we need a great new deal just to survive. Few people were as eager for a new deal as the people listening to the prophet Jeremiah. If you have been in our Sunday morning Bible studies the last several weeks, you know what I mean. Let’s catch the rest of you up, and even if you’ve been there, let’s review.

So, it had been an 800 year experiment in a new form of government, one nation under the Lord God. Eight centuries before our reading, God had made Israel his own. At Mt. Sinai he staked his claim on them. God promised to provide what they needed spiritually and temporally. The Israelites were to live lives of thankfulness, have him as their God. That sounded good, but 800 years later in our reading God laments, ***“[Israel] broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them.”*** In our days of dysfunctional families, easy divorce, and a society which insists that God’s Biblical design for marriage is one of many, we have trouble understanding our reading. God was not a fly-by-night father of some woman’s children; he was a husband. He took responsibility. He protected. He provided. He faithfully gave of himself for them. He was committed long-term.

But the years passed, and Israel got bored with her husband. Actually it didn’t take years, it took about one month. One month from promising eternal, unwavering faithfulness to God, most of the Israelites were bowing down to a golden calf and carousing. So began the long, long cycle of sin (not just sins of the moment and weakness, but sins of discarding God for the latest spiritual fling). It was a cycle of sin, repentance and reconciliation. On it went decade after decade, generation after generation.

Then God had had enough. It happened in the time of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was one of God’s longest serving prophet. His prophesied for 40 years, two full generations. His consistent message had been, “Reform, or something bad’s gonna happen.” While Jeremiah laid into them, there were other prophets. These guys prophesied, “Keep on doing what you are doing. Stock market’s great. We have a strong military and strong allies. There is peace all around. You’re good. Don’t worry.” About a generation into Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry, peace ended. Captives were carted off. Jeremiah kept saying, “Turn to the Lord.” The other prophets said, “Don’t worry. We are God’s people. The captives will be back very very soon.”

Jeremiah was the lone voice in the wilderness, a squeaky wheel, a prophet of destruction. The other prophets were positive, upbeat and encouraging. Who wanted to listen to grouchy, old Jeremiah? I mean, to whom would you rather listen? Those other prophets told them what they wanted to hear, made them feel good, told them to believe in themselves. Jeremiah was obviously a prude, a Puritan, a loser, so he was mocked, outcast, sometimes imprisoned;

A decade later, Jeremiah was proved right. This time thousands and thousands of Jews were led away as slaves to a far off land, all the best and brightest. Jeremiah was left behind with the humble and poor. But even after Jeremiah’s prophecies of doom had been proven right, people still wouldn’t listen.

That is when the Lord God told Jeremiah to write these words, actually all the words of chapters 29-31. God spoke them not to the people left in the land, but to the captives in far off exile who were trying to re-assemble their traumatized lives.

If you take the 52 chapters Jeremiah as a whole, these middle chapters are so precious. Do you remember back in the day when we used to write letters? You would get several letters over the course of the year, but every once in a while you would put a special letter in that drawer for special letters. Not every letter, just a very few that you couldn’t part with because even though you had read them a dozen times, tears of joy or love or remembrance still welled up in your eyes. That’s what chapters 29-31 are in Jeremiah. This book of the Bible has so much woe and despair, so much hoping for people to turn their lives around *and they don’t*!—that’s most of Jeremiah--but here in the middle are three chapters of hope, hope built on a new deal, what our reading calls, ***“God’s new covenant.”*** And now we are ready for our Bible reading,

***[read the text]***

God promises a new beginning. Not another attempt at the old system. He says, ***“I will make a new covenant.”*** Here, the Holy Spirit guides Jeremiah’s prophetic eye into the future. The 800 year old experiment of the Jewish nation under God had been a failure. It had had its moments of success, and God would use those for his bigger plans, but that old-fashioned concept of a nation; a physical, political embodiment of God’s people, that would be done. There would be a new covenant.

Wait a minute – what’s a covenant? I forget. Good question! A “covenant” is an agreement. It is way more than a shake of the hands. It is a legally binding agreement. Now when God makes a covenant, *God* makes it. That’s just the way it works, and you sit there and listen. And, when God would make them in the Bible, covenants usually required the shedding of blood of a sacrificial animal. That’s what happened in God’s covenant with Noah in Genesis 9, and in his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, and at Mount Sinai with all Israel in Exodus 24.

It isn’t gratuitous bloodshed; it serves a purpose. It is a sign of the utter seriousness in making the agreement. No excuses here. “Oops, the alarm didn’t go off this morning.” “I had to take the dog to the vet.” The sacrificed, dead animals were a symbolic way of saying, “If I break this promise, I forfeit my life.”

God’s covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, where Moses came down with the two stone tablets, is the one our reading calls the “old covenant.” God says in the future he will replace that one with a new one. ***“[My new covenant] will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt.”*** What was wrong with that covenant? Well, they broke it. They broke it because it was partially based on human obedience. We just aren’t capable of it. So that Mt. Sinai covenant will be replaced with a completely different arrangement. It’s not the free agent getting a bit more or less money than the old agreement, but an agreement that completely redefines free agency.

So what does this New Covenant have to do with us?

This phrase ***“New Covenant”*** is unique in the Old Testament, only in this one passage in Jeremiah. It never gets a chance to really fill out what this new covenant will be like. But one thing we do know is the key goal of this new covenant summed up in the last sentence: ***“For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.”*** This was the new covenant Jeremiah foresaw.

While ***“New Covenant”*** is used only once in the Old Testament, it is used several times in the New Testament, the part of the Bible written *after* Jesus came on the scene. And the person who takes up this phrase ***“New Covenant”*** and redefines it is none other than Jesus himself. The next time this phrase comes up it is in the New Testament, 600 years after Jeremiah—and this is significant—when Jesus spoke those words on the night before his sacrificial death, *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”* Jesus said something very important. He looked at his closest followers, all Jews who had been born under Mt. Sinai, and he consciously told them, “At this point in time, God’s old covenant is over. We’re doing something different here, guys. This is history’s pivot point.”

Notice another parallel. Like the other covenants, this covenant between God and humanity required blood to seal it. This new one used, not the blood of a pigeons, bulls or lambs, but God’s blood as the seal. This new covenant would not be built on human obedience. In this new one people were to simply watch, believe and trust what God did, what he did on the cross.

Today, when you come forward to receive God’s feast of Holy Communion, celebrate and remember that you participating in that New Covenant. What a different covenant it is! When the Sinai covenant was established through Moses, and Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of sacrificed calves, this is what Moses told them: *“This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you to keep”* (Heb 9:18; Ex 24:8). When Jesus established the new covenant he said, *“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out… for the forgiveness of sins”* (Matt 26:28). Do you hear the difference? “Keep commands” vs. “Forgiveness of sins”?

But here is the problem. Even though nobody can keep that old covenant, we human beings like the old covenant. In fact, we prefer about it.

We like law-based agreements. I gives us a right to boast, to be proud of ourselves, and look down on others: “I’ve never had a traffic ticket— I may not go to church, but I always have a buck for a beggar—I drink only ethically sourced coffee.”

Remember Jesus’ day and what the rule based Sinai covenant had turned into. When Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, the religious authorities, their faces turned blue when he challenged their man-made laws!

And this slips into Christianity too. Christianity’s had to struggle with it from the beginning. When Jesus’ Apostles were still alive and preaching some Christians tried to turn the new faith into a church of rules. (Acts 11&15) At the time of the Reformation, that’s what Christianity had devolved into. In modern times, you have heard of or maybe even belonged to churches where there was such an emphasis on “The Rules” that forgiveness was lost in the shuffle. Whenever the rules and our obedience predominate, we have rejected the new covenant for the old covenant. And that just won’t do. Because as the 800 year experiment with Israel proved, we just can not fulfill our obligations to The Covenant Of Doing What God Said. We have to rely on the New Covenant of the Forgiveness of Sins.

Rejoice in the New Covenant. Especially as we pass through Lent and draw near to Holy Week, we rejoice that, as Jesus said in the Gospel reading, *“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”* Make it your plan to be with us for those extra worship services next week, for in those moments we there celebrate Jesus establishing that New Covenant, peace between God and us. Amen.