

5th Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.17.24

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. (433)

A conversation in a casual setting among acquaintances not long ago turned to the question of church. This isn’t uncommon: my little churches haunt me. I imagine most people can see that haunting wherever I go. [Out of context, the comment that came at me sounds barbed. But it didn’t at the time.] The person I was talking with said something about my own job security. That the mighty, if largely hidden, struggle to keep these churches open and ready to receive whomever feels compelled to come through our doors, whether because of long-standing habit or a newly-sensed appeal or some return to a remembered way that evokes some yearning: it’s about my own job security. A self-serving effort, perhaps?

Hmm.

It recalled to me a conversation from even longer ago, divinity school. A student a couple years ahead of me, the son of a pastor, he said the church aims to be redundant. “Our aim,” he

once said, or something like, “is to put ourselves out of commission.” Which I said in this more recent conversation, remembering this which surprised me way back when. “Actually, we’re aiming to become redundant,” surprising then though which I meant utterly now.

But why should it have surprised me, that we’re not looking to survive but rather no longer to be necessary? Why should it have surprised me to hear him say as much? I mean, it’s right there in the Bible, right there in scripture: “I will put my law within them,” the Lord saying through the prophet Jeremiah, “and I will write it on their hearts; ... No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me...”

It’s right there in the Bible, in the prophecy of Jeremiah, this which the Lord promised through the prophet at a time when things were near their worst. Israel in the north had years since fallen, Assyria on the march. But Assyria would itself soon fall to Babylon, which anyone with any prophetic sense could have felt. Some people can just read the signs of the times, game things out, see where it’s all going.

Judea, of course, witnessed all this from their southern perch and thought not to succumb to what might otherwise seem inevitable. They would fight. They would join with neighboring nations and fight off any attack, maybe even spoil for an attack. “Come and get us!” Listening to prophets who stoked the national pride, men whom Jeremiah would denounce as false prophets, Judea would grow more and more belligerent, more and more delusional as to what they could accomplish.

They would get crushed. What’s more they would deserve it. This Jeremiah insisted, making himself considerably less popular than those who cheered on war. He urged surrender, national pride being no weapon against far-reaching imperial force. What’s more, the promise of the Lord’s favor, which had long been the people’s to trust, didn’t come with an arsenal, it came with a commandment to love—the Lord with all your heart and mind and your neighbor as yourself. Armed with this and this alone, surrender is the better course than belligerence—not only more prudent but also more faithful, not only more pragmatic but also more in accordance with that original call to the people. With war, you risk not only losing your life but also your soul. With surrender, you lose your pride, but you can still remain as a people.

Sort of.

An occupied people.

There are so often so few good choices when it comes to geo-politics.

So, Jerusalem was conquered and humiliated. The Temple was desecrated, violated, eventually destroyed. The people were deported but for those who had little worth—the very young, the old, the weak and unwell, left to dwindle and die amidst all this ruin.

Jeremiah was himself brought into exile, but he was held in a merciful captivity, given some grace for having counseled surrender rather than rebellion. It was a bitter existence for him, nonetheless, I imagine. Sometimes being right isn't all that satisfying.

This whole book is one of lament. Jeremiah is, in fact, known as “the weeping prophet.”

There is, however, this one section, this respite for consolation, dropped right into the center of it all. In fact, such a departure is it from the rest that some scholars of scripture suppose this not to be Jeremiah at all, but maybe Baruch his scribe or someone altogether unknown to us.

There's no telling, not for sure, not given what extant texts we now have. But I'm willing to take this as Jeremiah. I hear his impassioned voice here too. I don't think it's so improbable that there might be a coal of hope amidst otherwise consuming darkness. 18 degrees, right? Do you know about this? “18 Degrees is where the sun stands just below the horizon at daybreak. It's more dark than light in that moment, and hard to see the way forward.” This I've quoted from the website for the organization in Pittsfield, 18 Degrees. It used to be Berkshire Children and Families, but they changed their name to point to their mission, that moment of yet darkness when there's also new cause to hope.

And this hope, according to Jeremiah, is that there might come a time when people don't have to be so intentional and committed to living by God's law of love, that justice and righteousness, that peace and faithfulness might be things we can't *not* manage to manifest. And not just us (whoever “us” is) but everyone!

Imagine if all the world, all its moving parts and particles, all its creatures with such disparate ways of being and thriving, all lived in such a way that others might live as well—the wolf living with the lamb, the leopard lying down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child leading them. The cow and the bear dwelling together, the lion eating straw like the ox, none to hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” We won't have to *mean* it; it will come naturally. We won't have to study for it; it will be known to us. We won't have to practice it; it will come as perfection. Imagine!

We continue on our tour of the covenants of old. Lent during this so-called Year B has us revisiting the covenants of the Old Testament, the many ways God has promised presence and faithfulness to the people.

The first week had us with Noah following the flood. The rainbow would be as a reminder to the Lord, a reminder of the covenant never to abandon the creation back to its primordial state, watery chaos.

The second week had us with Abraham and Sarah, promised to become the antecedents of a world full of people. Astonishing people! People as a blessing. Can you get with that?

The third week had us recalling the Ten Commandments, the utterances of God that gave foundation to the Law by which the people could live as a people—basic disallowances that make it so we don't violate each other.

The fourth week had us with the considerably more strange bronze serpent on a pole, a making of what harms and kills into a possible remedy from that which harms and kills—an inoculation. It prefigures the cross, this weapon of torture and death, this vector of human violence, though suddenly, by great miracle, drained of its terrible power, given instead the power of grace and deathless life.

This week, we find ourselves a millennium later with Jeremiah, the promise of a new covenant. But this one would be different. It wouldn't be like a law external to the people. It wouldn't be something you'd need to bring intention to, a willingness to engage and even commitment to learn about. This would be written on the people's hearts, something you can't help but to obey, just as you can't help but to obey the beating of your own heart or the inhaling and exhaling of your lungs. This would be as a change in nature, a working out of all that which keeps you from living in God, that keeps us—any of us, all of us—from living in God, on that holy mountain where none hurt or destroy.

It's different in another way, too. Did you notice this? It's the first covenant of all we've revisited that isn't remembered to have taken place, is remembered as but a promise, remembered as something that *would* take place. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord..."

Which begs the question, have the days now come? In the two and half millennia that have passed since this word came to Jeremiah, in around the year 586 BCE; in the three and a half millennia that have passed since history emerged from myth, Noah, Abraham, Moses: have those days now come? Is this ancient promise of something to happen in the future now a thing we can look back on as having finally happened?

Well, take an honest look around. Take an honest look within. Do we need to keep rehearsing this? Or are we good?

When Jack was younger, I'd pick him up at Morris Elementary School where he was a student. The school bus was a bit more than he could handle, a daily escalation of emotion and conflict as he has never been one able to calm things down. So I, though hating to wait in my car in the line on West Street, would park on a side street and walk over. We'd often walk back with a classmate of his and that classmate's father, who lived on this side street, a Jewish boy from a Jewish household, turns out.

One day Jack was talking about church, which always would have my heart race a bit. He asked his friend, "Do you go to church?" and his friend, in as dry a tone then as he speaks in now, answered, "No, I'm good," which had me thinking, "That's about a better reason than most." His dad laughed a little nervously at this, glanced at me, but I assured him, "No, that's a really good reason."

As for the rest of us? Well, we're here, aren't we?

We're nearing the cross. As witnessed in the gospel reading, we're nearing the cross, in the context of this passage now three days away. Some Greeks have come to see Jesus, and this seems to be of mysterious significance, seems to have triggered in Jesus the dread that his time had come—which is typical of this gospel narrative. Lots of things in the Gospel of John are met with strange response, an ordinary thing said that triggers an extraordinary, or at least very strange, response. It's as if there's a secret code at work in so much of this gospel rendering, certain words redounding with layers of meaning.

"Come and see," is one of those phrases, something you'd hear in common speech, both then and now. But in the five times it's used in this gospel narrative, it triggers something extraordinary to happen—or at least something very strange.

So, some Greeks have come to see Jesus, and this then has Jesus recognize it is nearly time—for to see Jesus is to see God anew because it is to see God in Jesus, just a man, an ordinary man. It's moreover to see God anew because it's to see God in Jesus at the moment of his crucifixion, the moment of his most grave frailty, his most profound self-emptying, astoundingly generous, abounding in magnanimity. It is to see God less as almighty and more as self-giving, all for the sake of human violence coming to rest, human violence taken in by God and turned inside out and given forth as peace.

Turns out, God isn't a hero of the sort Greeks especially would have worshiped, obviously powerful, thrilling and enthralling! Turns out, God is self-giving, self-emptying, vulnerable and unfighting, all for the sake of a flourishing creation.

And that Greeks were ready to see this as God, Greeks whose culture had been violent in the extreme, whose glory had been in war and whose beauty had been in controlled stoicism and whose ideals had been a disciplining of the human form to such a degree that even the most made-up influencers on TikTok would be struck dumb with envious awe: that *Greeks* of all people were ready for this challenging truth, to see Jesus: well, then, the hour had come.

There is an important confession about the cross, that this is the new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke on behalf of the Lord. That in the cross, the law is fulfilled by grace, the law, all the rules by which we're taught to live our lives so we don't violate one another, all come to be things we freely practice rather than only perform for threat of punishment.

You can see this move when you consider human development. With children and less so with adolescents, you find yourself enforcing rules that eventually become unnecessary to enforce. They become clear as a good way the growing person now seems free and happy to choose.

And the choice in that is important. God apparently desires human freedom, the freedom of each of us to choose the good.

Which makes this promised coming covenant an even more puzzling one, that the days are coming when God will so very much be the all-in-all that choosing God isn't even necessary. Are you *choosing* to have your heart beat right now, to pump blood throughout your body? To try to say that you are doesn't even make grammatical sense. If I were to speak of you beating your own heart, it would evoke an image of you pounding on your hearts with your fists. Though you are, in your living, an essential part of your heart now beating, your heart also beats on its own.

This new covenant: it will come of us all freely choosing this new covenant but a covenant so appealing it's nearly impossible to resist, so clear will it be that this is how life might abound.

Meanwhile, we must practice it—or at least I must, and in the context of “we.” Because our aim isn't just to be good, but to be good to and with one another. This isn't just a matter of ourselves being good, in isolation, some purity of soul that has little to do with life shared with others. This is about being good amidst a teeming creation. That prayer: “God, I've been so good today. I haven't had any cruel thoughts or outbursts of temper. I've been kind and gracious and compassionate and of good cheer. But now I must get out of bed and start the day, so all bets are off.”

That's what congregational life is about, practicing such things so that promised covenant might be established, practicing kind consideration of the other, practicing knowing where I end and you begin and how we enter that shared space between us, practicing how not to judge and violate and control and manipulate one another, instead to love one another so our loveliest selves can emerge in safety and can trust to find their free expression.

That the world might be such a flourishing and free place: this is the promise. That the church *must* be such a flourishing and free place: this is the means, the vessel for our happy arrival at that promised end.

That day is surely coming, closer now for our gathering here.

Thanks be to God.