

St. Paul's Congregational Church
March 18, 2018, Jeremiah 31: 31-34, John 12: 20 – 33
Lent 5B: The Days Are Coming
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We've been looking this Lenten season at many stories in the Old Testament about covenant, from Noah and the rainbow through Abraham and Sarah and their many descendants (including us) to Moses and the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai. In this week's beautiful reading, the prophet Jeremiah speaks of a covenant written not in rainbow or stone, not external, but written deep inside, on the very hearts of the people. It's one of my favorite passages.

Jeremiah's writing in a very bad time for his nation and city. Evidence of the broken covenant with God was everywhere – corrupt city and religious leaders, lavish wealth at the expense of the poor, political and military collapse leading to the destruction of the city and its people, some carried off into exile. Sounds too familiar to us today, doesn't it.

In the midst of this brokenness the people of God forgot the law and the worship of the living God. They forgot they were indeed people of God. But by this 31st chapter, Jeremiah is no longer scolding the people for their sin and their lack of faithfulness to God. Instead, he brings the people a new message from God: good news, a word of comfort and hope. God has had compassion on the people; God's heart has been touched by their suffering, and God forgives them.

It's at this tough time when God makes sweeping promises to the people of Israel, promises of restoration and return. Once again, as in so many covenant stories before, God promises to be in relationship with the people - like God's promises to Noah, to Abraham and Sarah, and to Moses and the people at Sinai - God promises to be a presence with the people, abiding with them, and promises that they will even belong to each other: God says, I will be your God, and you...you will be my people.

Even though the prior covenants have been broken, God is using words like "new" and "heart" and "covenant" again. The great scholar of the Old Testament, Walter Brueggemann, calls this the "core memory" of Israel about God: that God will do today, in this bad circumstance, what God has done in the past. God will give a new covenant, a new relationship, a new creation. God doesn't do these things merely out of some kind of

stubborn faithfulness, Brueggemann says, but out of deep, wounded love and profound grief that have moved God beyond anger to tender caring. It's a thing of the heart, really: God decides this time that the law will be written not on stones, not on something external, but inside, deep inside the people, written on their hearts. When that covenant is written on our very hearts it becomes part of us, it becomes so deeply within each of us, that we'll never forget it, that covenant will inform everything we do, everything we are.

What encouragement this brings! What a vision of challenge and hope to a beleaguered people. What a vision it is for each of us today as we struggle, each in our own way, with the trials and tribulations of life today, with our own exile that we all know from time to time. And what encouragement this brings to us as church. What a vision of challenge and hope this new covenant brings to us as we look to our future ministry here in Nutley.

How do we take on this new covenant into our hearts? By opening our hearts to new life as people of God. In our heads we can decide what to do, but do we – for it's only when our heart truly owns the change that we'll take a risk: only when our heart is touched, only when we know deep inside of us on a different level – it's then that we know something new and wonderful is held out in front of us. This is the “new testament”, literally “new covenant.” New life. New promise. New life really is possible for us – even for people like you and me who find it so very hard to change, to start over, to begin again, to be new people.

And as people of God, we aren't permitted to give up on ourselves. We're not to despair our ability to be the sort of people God would have us be – because God hasn't given up on us. God keeps creating us.

And you know, I'm not so sure our times are all that different from Jeremiah's time. Lots to be discouraged about.....but there is that new covenant available for our hearts and we need to be reminded that God hasn't given up on us. This got very real for me this week.

On Wednesday I was driving to Jury Duty at the Newark Courthouse – it was shortly after 10am when I came around a corner on West Market Street in front of one of Newark's high schools. The students were all outside, standing in silence on the sidewalk – it was so quiet as the students, teachers, the bystanders on the sidewalk – were all taking time to remember those 17 lives lost in Parkland, Florida. And just down the street the same thing was happening at the community college.

As I turned the corner toward the courthouse parking lot, I saw the courthouse steps filled with more students. It was so moving – honestly, I had tears in my eyes, especially as it hit me that these students were dealing

not only with the horror of Parkland, but also the horror of unspeakable violence in their own neighborhoods - maybe you saw the article in the Star Ledger, the statement by one of the history teachers who said that 46 of his students have been killed during his 20 year career. What a wonderful example these quiet demonstrations were of not giving up, looking beyond their own pain and fear, standing in solidarity with youth everywhere.

We're not to despair, question, our own ability to be the sort of people God would have us be – because God hasn't given up on us. We can do this! We are called to do this! We must do this!

Here we are, deep in the Lenten season, approaching Holy Week. What difference does this season make to us, the most holy time of the year for Christians – as individuals and church?

I keep thinking about the image of throwing a rock and watching it skip across the water. Ever try that? It's not easy. The rock has to be exactly the right size, the right shape, and you have to have exactly the right wrist motion to skip it across the surface and if you're lucky it skips 2-3 times – maybe more, before it goes under. I wonder if for some of us, this season has been like that rock – surface observance, maybe, but not a slowing down, in depth examination of what indeed this season, this faith, this journey as people of God means to us and how we are called to live that out.

We live our lives so fast, don't we. We're so terribly busy, so terribly overscheduled. Our kids come home from school late after activities, sit down to do homework, take a quick dinner break (if they're lucky), go back to homework or maybe attend a late night sports practice – stay up until midnight and then get up at 5 – 6:00 in the morning to get to school and then do it all over again day after day.

And there are those who get the earliest train, get to work at the crack of dawn, stay late, bring work home, get up the next morning and do it all over again. Exhausting, isn't it.

There are folks who are so scheduled, who so schedule their kids with activities, that there's no time to just "be." All this activity isn't a bad thing – sports, activities, work: all of that is good for kids, for us – but...I get caught up in that too. At the end of the day I go to bed and wonder what I've accomplished. What I've done. Is that how we measure ourselves? Is that how society honors us now? More importantly, is that how God measures us?

And on the other hand, there are people who don't have enough to do – maybe they think their creative, productive lives are over. Day by day they get up, read the paper, do the breakfast dishes, and then don't have

much of anything else to do. These are folks who can too easily give up on themselves – the loss of meaning in their lives is all too real. How does society honor these people? How do we?

The truth is: people of God – we all matter. We are all precious in God's sight.

Maybe, just maybe, all this is a hint for us of the purpose of being a faithful church community, bound in covenant with God and each other and our neighbors. Again, this got very real this week.

Thursday night I learned that a 10th grader I'd had in confirmation a couple years ago had been hospitalized following her 6th – yes, 6th suicide attempt – she'd overdosed on some pills and by the grace of God, her parents found her and got her to the ER in time. Her mother writes, "She's been tormented by her inner demons since she was in 3rd grade – when we asked her why she took the pills, she said she didn't want to wake up any more – imagine hearing that from your child. Her mother continues, "We want her to know that she belongs on this earth, that she has a purpose – we want her to know that she can get rid of the darkness."

And I thought of two other former confirmands I knew and loved who had taken their lives. And I thought of the two students in last year's Nutley High School senior class who had taken their lives.

And I've been thinking of the people who have walked in these doors who have sat down in the pews and wept, who have laid their pain in the lap of God, hoping to find a peace and love and acceptance, hoping to believe the good news that they matter!

Friends, this is a good time to be church. This is an essential time to be church. The truth is: we all matter. We are all precious in God's sight. These are difficult times for so many people – the pain may be hidden – but it's there. We have so many opportunities right here, right now among the people we meet every week – here, or wherever we spend our days. Whenever we take the time to hear with our hearts, not just our ears; everytime we feel with our hearts, not just with our logical minds. We have opportunities to live out that covenant written on our hearts.

God doesn't give up on us – when our rocks stop skipping across the water and go under, God will reach down and pull us out. That's what the new covenant is about. The day is surely coming – it's here! We can begin again. We can change. We can start over. We can be a new people of God.

The promises of the living God are sure and certain. We can believe them. We can trust them. We can rest securely in those promises, but not rest passively - this is an active resting – thanking God for renewing grace, praying for courage and understanding in keeping the law in both heart and

head and deed, working patiently but persistently for that kind of new community where the divine covenant is written on everyone's heart. Not just into laws, contracts, agreements, bylaws – always trusting, always believing that God strengthens and blesses our efforts, that those efforts truly amount to something in the divine vision that is coming to new birth.

There's the challenge. There's the vision. We all are called to discover those places where the vision of Jeremiah and Jesus is struggling to be realized – both as individuals and as a church community. Each of us must find the time and place to witness, to participate, to take risks.

Each of us must see with our hearts the Spirit reminders that are such miracles – they are right in front of us. May we slow down to see them! May we praise God for them! May we do our part to help others sense and believe that vision.

I give thanks to God for this week – for those “get real times”, for the burning reminders that it's about opening my heart – for being touched by the Living God – for stopping and giving God room to work and responding to God's call.

May each of us see the miracles in front of us – and go forth and share that awesome good news with others. And remember the promise: I will be your God and you will be my people. Amen.

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