

Fifth Sunday in Lent March 21, 2021 First Presbyterian Church, Battle Creek MI
 “Staring Life in the Face” Jeremiah 31:31-34 Rev. Patricia Weatherwax

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. - Jeremiah 31:31-34

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah31:31-34&version=NRSV>

We continue in our review of the Old Testament covenants, which proclaim God’s love and grace. Are we taking the hint, hearing the Bible’s consistent message, that God is always faithful to us, even when we aren’t responding with faith? God’s not going to blast us with a fire hose. The covenants are sips of a refreshing cup of cold water. Cleansing, Refreshing, Sustaining.

Here's today's point, right up front: God’s love and promises do not leave us, when we sin or when our world gets rocked by our circumstances. God’s love and promises do not depend on us all. This writing of Jeremiah comes shortly after verses that many of us know and love, promises we cling to:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Jeremiah 29:11
 God knows the plan, knows that our future is secure. Even if it’s rocky, we always have hope.

Do you remember much about the context of Jeremiah? The people of Israel were “dispersed”. Their circumstances were bad. They weren’t in control of their own way of life. The Babylonians are about to overrun the city and life, as God’s people knew it, was about to change (for the worse).

In this time of “diaspora” - being scattered, there was a loss of community cohesiveness: God’s people were not all together like they had been after they left Egypt. There was national disunity and uncertainty: politically they were no longer large and in charge. There was religious disunity: how do we follow God in a strange place, when we aren’t the majority? They were overwhelmed by the powers working against them. The outside forces were changing the way of life that they were used to.

That to me sounds quite familiar, 2020-2021. Like Psalm 137’s journaling of this time of exile, **we** sit and cry “remembering the good old days”, whether it was pre-pandemic or pre-this season of our life, or pre-grief. It’s been said “ it would be great to know we were in the good old days before we left them”.

So maybe these covenants are relevant for us? And more than in just a “Jesus loves me, this I know”, way, not that that’s a bad promise. But with God’s faithfulness, there’s always: “richer, fuller, deeper, Jesus love is sweeter, sweeter as the years go by”. And it’s a consistent promise, from all the “old covenants” into and through the new, ending when all things are, when they will be, made new and made right.

Understand this, God was inspiring the future, humanities future, in Jeremiah’s time and refreshing 600 BC into the the 65 AD days of the early church, and to now. It still is hard to wrap my head around that God has no framework of time like which controls our lives. But that certainly must be true. Psalm 90:4, to God “a thousand years are as a passing day, as brief as a few night hours. And 2 Peter 3:8: “You must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day.” So, our “new covenant” sealed with Jesus’ blood, for the forgiveness of sins, is not new to God!

The early Christians heard this from their Jewish heritage. See if these verses from Hebrews 8, written to early Jewish Christians sound familiar:

But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.

God finds fault with them when he says: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not 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. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.” In speaking of “a new covenant,” he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear. Hebrews 8:6-13

What’s going to disappear? Jesus is quoted in the three synoptic gospels: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” Now what does that mean?? Lately one of my favorite verses is Ecclesiastes 3:11,

paraphrased it reminds us:

“God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover God has put a sense of past and future into our minds, yet we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

“Ah, sweet mystery of life, at last I found thee” - nope. A mystery solved is no longer a mystery! God remains a mystery.

There are three parts of this covenant promise to especially ponder, and see it carrying on to the early church and then to us:

1. God says: “I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

God *keeps* making this promise, even when the people, we people, keep breaking our promises and our commitments. It’s what we’ve heard from the Genesis 17:7 covenant. God promises: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you”. (It’s the covenant we reviewed from Lent week 2.) Written on our hearts, it stays with us!

God will, by the very “creative power of God’s love”, write this covenant upon the hearts of the men and women- so that we know we belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior. (Heidelberg Q&A 1).

2. God promises in this OT covenant, something that is God’s business to influence, and our job to witness to: that “they shall all know me”.

I can’t jump the gun, but next week’s covenant comes from Philippians 2, which is another OT promise that is carrying forward:

that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

3. God promises, and we have full assurance. God establishes this covenant of **grace**: “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

I’ve always loved the image from Psalm 103:12: “As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgression from us”. And realize, just like God is not dependent on our cycle of time, God is also not constrained by our geometry or geography! In Jeremiah 31, verses 35-37 after the passage Mike read it says:

It is the Lord who provides the sun to light the day and the moon and stars to light the night, and who stirs the sea into roaring waves. His name is the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, and this is what he says: “I am as likely to reject my people Israel as I am to abolish the laws of nature!” This is what the

Lord says: “Just as the heavens cannot be measured and the foundations of the earth cannot be explored, so I will not consider casting them away for the evil they have done. I, the Lord, have spoken!” Jeremiah 31:35-37
 Instead, the covenant promises and the New Testament epistle writer explains:
 we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. Galatians 2:16

Jesus, the cross, new covenant and new earth? When will God’s kindom fully come? How will the new covenant be handled? What is God doing? Remember my favorite Ecclesiastes text: “people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end”. We are “Already, not yet!”- in the middle of all that God intends. Redeemed, but not complete. Some day we will be.

And God promises this moment in time is not the last word. This moment in time - which may feel unbearable, or be part of our best season ever, is not all there will be. We live in gratitude for the best days. We stare life in the face in the worst of times. And we always, always have hope for the days to come. Because God is with us, in our hearts, bringing all toward salvation and graciously forgiving us of all sin. Those are some promises, the covenant of amazing grace.

If you have a Glory to God hymnbook, check out Hymn 692, Verse 2. Ruth Duck, a modern hymn writer, theologian, and professor, brings her prayer of God’s covenant through Jeremiah, as our covenant of response:

Write your love upon my heart,
 as my law, my goal my story.
 In each thought, word, and deed,
 may my living bring you glory.

Amen.