

Sermon March 18, 2018 Lent 5b Jeremiah
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

There is an “ancient Chinese curse” that goes like this: May you live in interesting times. It’s a ‘curse’ that sounds like a blessing: May you live in interesting times. Of course, there is absolutely nothing either ancient or Chinese about this saying at all. It is probably just something someone made up, but it’s been around for almost a century now so it obviously captures something that we can all relate to. May you live in interesting times. Bobby Kennedy used it in the sixties in one of his most famous speeches. That probably helped to spread it around. But I guess most of us feel like we know for ourselves what it means to live in interesting times. The prophet Jeremiah definitely did.

He lived and prophesied 2600 years ago in the late 7th century BCE and he saw incredible sorrow in his life and for his people. In one of his earliest visions, when he was “only a boy” he sees “a boiling pot tilted away from the north” and he knows that the Babylonian army is about to pour down its wrath on Jerusalem and the Jewish nation. Interesting times.

Jeremiah understand the impending invasion as God’s punishment for their adulterous ways. They have turned away to other gods, worshipping at the hilltop shrines of the Baals and Asherahs of the

local Canaanite fertility religion, breaking the covenant that God gave them on Sinai whose first commandment is: I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other god before me.

For the next thirty years Jeremiah hurls his prophecies at the people, exhorting them in extremely colourful language to mend their evil ways and return to the Lord, but it is all for nought. Jerusalem is repeatedly invaded and eventually her people and leaders exiled to Babylon where they will spend the next forty years or so in captivity. Interesting times.

The psalmist records it in this heartbreaking way:

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
- 2 On the willows* there
we hung up our harps.
- 3 For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'
- 4 How could we sing the Lord's song

in a foreign land?

More interesting times. But the story does not end there. After thirty chapters of tears and lamentation, when all seems lost, a new note arrives in Jeremiah's prophecy. He begins to see beyond the broken covenant of Sinai, the "whoring after other gods" and the punishment of exile, to a whole new relationship between Jahweh and his people. After so many visions of destruction and punishment, the boiling pots, the filthy cloths, the earthen vessels smashed to bits, he proclaims these encouraging words:

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.

Although 'lamentation' is eternally link to the name Jeremiah, this new vision of a covenant written on the heart is his most enduring prophecy. In the next chapter he goes on:

37See, I am going to gather them from all the lands to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation; I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety. 38They shall be my people, and I will be their God. 39I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good and the good of their children after them. 40 I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me. 41I will rejoice in doing good to them, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.

For Jeremiah, the covenant on Sinai was conditional. If the law was broken, so was the covenant. But this new covenant is in a different place, written on the heart. It is extraordinary to me that someone writing so long ago, in a culture so unlike our own, can have written *for the first time* something so awesomely *immediate* as this insight, that God's law is within us and that it is written on our hearts.

As God touched the boy Jeremiah's mouth to give him the power of speech and prophecy, I doubt there is anyone, from the least of us to the greatest, who can hear these words without feeling somehow touched by God hands, breaking open this cage of ribs to free the meaning of the heart. I think it is impossible *not* to feel the pen of the Almighty, the finger of the Holy One, inscribing His eternal, unbreakable bond of love deep within us, in this tenderest of places. It hits us where we live, making of the heart what it always was, a holy place - where we not only visit but dwell.

But there is more. To quote the Girardian scholar Paul Nuechterlein, "The shape of God's love and mercy that can write the law upon our hearts is forgiveness." If the people are not forgiven, this new covenant cannot be made and cannot be eternal. It is a turning point for God, for Jerusalem, and for us.

But most importantly this is not a covenant for *individuals*. It is personal to each of us, discovered from within, but it calls us outward to costly forgiveness with each other and enduring relationship. That always makes for interesting times! Perhaps the ancient curse really is a blessing after all.