

5th Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2021
Grace Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51:1-13
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for today's meditation is Jeremiah 31:33--*This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law with them and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.*

Our Old Testament readings this Lent have focused on covenant – the promises – between God and God's people. There's the covenant God made with Noah – he saved Noah and his family from the flood waters and then promised to never again destroy the world by flood. And the covenant with Abraham and Sarah when God promised that even though Abraham was old and “as good as dead” God would make of him a great nation and that in this Abraham would be blessed to be a blessing to all.

Then there is the covenant that God made with the nation of Israel as they were traveling in the wilderness – he told them how they could best live together in love and harmony – he gave them the 10 Commandments. And last week we heard the story of the bronze serpent that God provided so that whoever looked upon it would be saved from the bite of the deadly snakes – snakes that were sent by God because God's people spoke against God.

And today in our Old Testament reading we hear more covenant talk now. Jeremiah writes of a time to come when there will be a new covenant between God and God's people. And this new covenant won't be like the old covenant that the people broke even though God had been like a faithful husband to them. No, this one would be different than the covenant given at Mt. Sinai. That one was written in stone and had to be externally imposed.

This new covenant would be internally imposed – indeed, it would be written on the hearts of the people. There will be no need for pastors or Sunday School teachers or confirmation instructors. No, because each one will know God directly – they will not have to be taught.

It's rather like that relationship you may have with someone – you need only look at them to know what they're thinking, you can finish each other's sentences. You can communicate with just a quick glance. It's that kind of intimacy with God that we have in the new covenant.

Why were these words so important for Jeremiah to proclaim and for the people to hear? Dark clouds were looming on the horizon for the Kingdom of Judah. Because of the unfaithfulness of the kings of Judah and the unfaithfulness of God's people, the kingdom was conquered by the Babylonians, who devastated the land and destroyed the Temple. The cream of the crop of Jewish society was forced into exile. And those left behind were the poorest of the poor, the sick and infirm, left to fend for themselves.

But, you see even in the midst of words and times of judgment, God offers a message of hope through the prophet Jeremiah. *“The days are SURELY coming,” says God Almighty, “when I shall make a NEW covenant with you.”*

Remember, once it is said in Jewish culture of old, it is as good as done. This is God's spoken promise of a new covenant. Earlier in Jeremiah we read the words written to those in exile in a

strange land, *“For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope.”*

And, brothers and sisters, we too claim that hope that Jeremiah proclaimed as we too are in a type of exile. It was a year ago today. For the first time in years (except for vacations), I stayed home and watched the CBS Sunday Morning Show rather than come to church to lead Bible Study, to worship and preach, to drink coffee with you all during our fellowship hour. Many of us imagined that this would be a couple of weeks or so. Others knew differently. So, it has been quite a year, hasn't it. A year with new protocols, new controversies, new diseases, new data, new terminology, new isolation, new aloneness, new loneliness. We have been so hungry for gathering together again, for embracing one another, for seeing one another – one another's whole face. For worshipping together, for singing, for the way things used to be. Yet, out of love for each other and for our neighbor and our community we have refrained. Despite our strong yearnings to the contrary, we have followed safety protocols. We have lived into new routines. And we have waited.

Some of us have become data-watchers – on any given day I can tell you the ICU occupancy rate, the Polk County vaccination rate, the number of new cases per hundred thousand of population, our positivity rate, and on and on. None of this changes the reality, of course. But it has helped me understand the gravity of this pandemic which is very very real. It has helped me come to terms with this exile in which we all are living.

This reality helped me also hold on to the hope that we have in Christ. The hope that is born of covenantal relationship that God has created with us. The hope that is at the heart of this new covenant of God with God's people.

So here we are in Lent – a place in which we are reminded of the difficult times in our lives. A time when we cling to that hope.

During Lent, we may think that we ought to dwell on how awful we are, how sinful we are, how much hope we dare not have – because of choices we have made, things that we have done, things that we have left undone, we have not loved God with our whole heart nor have we loved our neighbor as our self.

Oh, if only I had tried harder and done better! If only I had prayed more. If only I were more kind. If only, I could somehow make things right with God. Oh, Lent be done so that I can get out from under these looming clouds of guilt and shame!

But Lent is NOT about “getting right with God,” it is not a 6 week self-improvement course; it is not a time of shame and despair.

During Lent we are drawn to the realization that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We are human beings who are sinful since the Fall of Adam and Eve. We each suffer the chronic and congenital condition of being sinful. St. Augustine said that left to our own devices, we are not able to not sin. Let me say that again – we are not able to not sin. So with the Psalmist we pray, “Create a new and clean heart in me, Lord and put in me a new spirit – a new will.”

Lent IS about recognizing the hope that we have because of what God does for us and in us. Because of God taking the first step into our lives, because we are baptized children of the King, because of the Holy Spirit working in our lives.

But my friends, this is most certainly NOT an individual happening. In Lent, we, as a community of faith, live into our lives in the new covenant. We pray, worship, to feed the hungry, to clothe those in need. We weep and laugh, talk and listen.

We are together during this time of exile in a different way – technology has become more important, who knew that we would do FaceBook Live, that we would livestream and have the skill and equipment that we have today. Who knew that phone calls and voice to voice conversations would become so important in a way that perhaps we have forgotten. Who knew that this all would come about because of the covenant of grace that God has created in us and for us to live as God's people.

Our life together looks different than it did a year ago. Our life together in the months and years to come will look different than it looked a year ago. But, my friends, this is the constant – God's steadfast love and mercy lived out for us in the love of Jesus poured out for us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.