
“Back to the Basics”

A SERMON on Jeremiah 31:31-34 for Reformation Sunday
Preached 31 October 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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I can still picture it clearly to this day, even though it's going on some 16 or 17 years ago since I saw it. “It” was just one hand clasped inside another—a simple image, a common-enough gesture. But clearly in this case it was much more than that. After all, how often does a simple hand-in-another-hand bring an entire congregation, including its pastors, to tears in the middle of Sunday worship?

You see, Claire and Rebecca were weary for the journey. Their story is special but, unfortunately, not unique. A lesbian couple in the supposedly liberal bastion of Arlington, Virginia—or, well, liberal at least as far as Virginia is concerned—they had laboured long and hard to find a church community in which they were welcome. Claire came from a Roman Catholic background, and so they started their journey there. They were quickly ushered out the door, though, when the church told them that they could not stand together as parents to have their daughter Isabella baptized. They gave up for a while—if the church seemingly did not need them, why should they need the church? And yet, with an infant son now, too, the Holy Spirit prodded them to re-enter the journey.

Over pancakes at their kitchen table after church one Sunday, Claire told me the story: one day she simply started down the church listings in the yellow pages, dialling up each one on the telephone. Call after call, the answer was the same: “We don't think you'll be comfortable here.” “I'm not sure that we're the right church for you.” Having gotten all the way to the 'L's, she was out right crying by the time the pastor of the Presbyterian church about 10 blocks away answered ‘I'm not sure we're the place for you, but you might try *those people* down at Rock Spring(!)’ By the grace of God, the next call, to “those people” down at Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ, where I had the privilege of working for a full year between my middle and final years of theological studies, was different. *Come.*

And so, the very next Sunday, Claire and Rebecca did come, they came and took a seat in one of the white, colonial style pews at Rock Spring. And not only did they come, but filled with bold courage, Claire stood up during the welcoming of visitors and for the first time ever in a church uttered the words, ‘I'm Claire, and *this is my partner* Rebecca, and our children Isabella and Spencer’.

“We're glad you're here,” said dear 95-year-old Olive Swinney to them after the service.

Now about 9 months later, on a bright morning early in the season of Advent, I stood watch from up on the chancel as my two colleagues—Chuck and Jennifer, the senior and associate pastors of the church, respectively—performed the baptisms of Isabella and Spencer. This part of the service unfolded as they often do at Rock Spring, with the parents and other family members gathering with the pastors around the font in the area down in front of the chancel. The pastors went through the usual address, and prayer, and questions to the parents. Then Chuck took Isabella over closer to the font as Claire and Rebecca nervously looked on. And suddenly, with that demeanour of the excited but nervous mom, I saw Claire abruptly reach out and clutch Rebecca's hand. Seeing that reach and those hands clasped, tears came to my eyes as I felt how enormously special this moment was... *precisely* because it was *perfectly normal*. These two baptisms, of Isabella and of Spencer, they were no different than any of the other baptisms I witnessed at Rock Spring Church. And yet that is *exactly* why the moment was so special.

This moment was not *only* special for me, though—certainly I was not the only crying. Truly this was a moment for the Rock Spring congregation when they were coming to know God’s new covenant written on their hearts. After all, coming to this particular baptismal day hadn’t been an entirely easy journey for this congregation. They had spent fully two years embroiled in discussion and debate before they finally declared themselves an “Open and Affirming” congregation (the terminology equivalent to our Affirming Ministries here in The United Church of Canada). About four years had passed since that declaration, but still, this semi-suburban congregation didn’t up to that point have very many openly lesbian or gay people in active membership. And indeed, this day was the very first time that the Rock Spring congregation had surrounded a same-gender couple as their children were baptized. To have an Affirming statement written down on paper was one thing; to celebrate such a moment together that would write it on their hearts was quite another.

In the days when the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed the word of the Lord to the Hebrew peoples, they, it seemed, had *not* been up to the challenge of keeping and living into their covenants. In fact, they faced the undeniable collapse of a collective dream. Today’s passage drops us off in the midst of what was called the Babylonian Exile. This was a time in the history of God’s people when hopes and dreams of the nation had been smashed to pieces. Long after their escape from slavery and their settling in the Promised Land, after the rise of mighty King David and wise King Solomon, and after they then endured one evil king after another, they get taken over by—and taken away to—a foreign kingdom, the kingdom of Babylon.

The biblical witness largely understands this defeat and exile to be the consequence of the nation’s unfaithfulness to the covenant God had made with them or, more deeply, their unfaithfulness to God. Right up front in the covenant between God and the people were the commandments to have no other gods and to refrain from making idols to worship. Perhaps some of you remember these, the first and second of the famous “Ten Commandments”. And yet, earlier on in the book of Jeremiah, we hear that those are *exactly* the things the nation has done:

How can you say, “I am not defiled, I have not gone after the [other gods]? Look at your way in the valley; know what you have done ... As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed—they, their kings, their officials, their priests, and their prophets, who say to a tree, “You are my father,” and to a stone, “You gave me birth.” For they have turned their backs to me and not their faces. ... Where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them come, if they can save you, in your time of trouble; for you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah.¹

Clearly Jeremiah is not going to pull any punches as he speaks the truth about the nation’s betrayal. And lest we doubt Jeremiah’s testimony, the archaeological evidence, scholars tell us, actually bears out Jeremiah’s witness, giving “clear testimony to the worship of many gods and goddesses in Israel and Judah,” and showing that “they attempted to worship Yahweh by means of images,”² too.

And so, as the consequence of not living into who they were created and called to be as a nation, their existence as a nation has been ended. Despair is deep. Hope is lost. The people who had once struggled their way out of one foreign land now were being taken off to another. They were *supposed* to be a nation blessed to be a blessing to the world. And *now*, they were no longer a

¹ from Jeremiah 2:23-28.

² John Goldingay, commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34, in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn, vol. 1 - *The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 442.

nation at all—dissolved, conquered, taken over, and eaten up. It was, in short, a catastrophe.

But in the face of the complete collapse of the Israelite Dream—as the great Temple was being torn down, as Jeremiah was taken far away into a foreign land with the other Israelites—he still found reason to hope. Jeremiah still found reason to dream. For God promises that, in fact, a new covenant is being forged. God promises that a new dream is being dreamt.

This time it will be different. This time, the covenant *will* endure and the dream will not fail. For, this time, the covenant will not be written in the laws of human rulers and, this time, the dreams will not be born out of human pride and aspiration. This time God will write the covenant upon the heart so that there will no longer be a need to say to one another, “know the Lord,” for all will know God from the centre of their very beings. This time the dream will be God’s dream; not a fantasy of the night, but a vision of creation, as sure and certain as the rising of the sun when we see the first light of morning.

Note though, that when it comes right down to it, this supposedly “new” covenant God promised through the words of the prophet Jeremiah isn’t really all that new at all. In fact, it is something very, very old, something so old that it goes all the way back to the very beginning. “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” That’s the centre of this supposedly new covenant, *and* it is the very root of who God is and who the people always had been created to be.

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When I look back at that scene of Isabella’s and Spencer’s baptisms at Rock Spring Church, I think it was no coincidence that this special moment of transformation for that congregation—a new in-breaking of the covenant of God’s word of grace, a new writing of it on the hearts of this people—came not in something new, but rather something very, very old. Together, they all dared to continue in Christ’s word proclaimed in baptism, a thing as old as Christianity itself. They dared to bear witness to the promises of grace, new life, and God’s coming reign, promises pointed to by the waters that have washed over people for generations of generations. And yet, in doing these old things together, a new knowing of the truth that makes us free burst forth in their midst. They followed a reliable, well-worn road and there encountered nothing less than God’s Holy Spirit. And as always, the Holy Spirit stirred up power and made the old, old story new once again: that God would be their God, and that they all would fully be the people God had created them to be, as individuals and as a church.

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As God did to Jeremiah, as God did for Claire and Rebecca and the people of Rock Spring, God speaks to us of a new hope, my friends, this day... a hope founded in God’s old, old word of both surprise and grace written anew upon our very hearts. It is a dream born not of human pride and aspiration, nor of social mores or political ideologies, but dreamt by God out of God’s life-long love affair with us, a vision painted in the colours of redemption and salvation for all humanity.

And unlike our own broken dreams, unlike our own empty covenants with ourselves, God’s dream is sure and God’s covenant will endure all hardships and adversity.

And, my friends, so will we.

After all, the days are surely coming, says the Lord. The days are surely coming.

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.