

A NEW COVENANT

Lent 5 Year B

Jer. 31:31-34; Ps. 51:1-12 or Ps. 119:9-16; Heb. 5:5-10; Jn 12:20-33

Gladstone 21/03/2021

A few weeks ago, we celebrated a baptism. During the service, immediately prior to the baptism, we sung the song, *Covenant Child*. The first verse says:

*Covenant child,
water comes as a sign
of the washing and cleansing
renewing your mind.
Covenant child,
you are claimed as God's own.
You are one of His people.
His church is your home.*

What does it mean to be a “covenant child” or alternatively, “a child of the covenant”. What covenant? What even is a covenant? I know that in a recent sermon, I did elaborate a little bit, but today I want to offer a few more thoughts as we delve into our Old Testament reading for today from the book of Jeremiah.

Mention the word “covenant” to the average person today and you won’t get much of a reaction. It’s not a word that gets a lot of play in everyday conversation. If you Google it, you’ll find about 30 million search results but you would have to go through hundreds of Google search pages before you ran out of search results that were the names of churches, hospitals, schools, retirement communities, and the like. Somehow “covenant” is a good name for establishments even though it’s not a word we typically use in day-to-day life. I’m sure, however, that *you* all have a fairly good understanding by now, because we’ve been talking about covenants for a few weeks now.

Most people are far more familiar with words listed as synonyms for “covenant” like “contract” or “deal” or “agreement.” The closest most people get to anything remotely akin to the biblical sense of the word is probably due to the popularity of the first Indiana Jones movie where “the Ark of the Covenant” plays a prominent role. But even in that case, the meaning of “covenant” is at best foggy to most people who watch that film.

Most people believe a covenant is pretty much like a contract and so if they have any associations with this word at all, it is usually in the realm of all that is proper and legal and official. You sign on the dotted line. You make promises. You become obligated to

make payments on loans or to perform certain tasks as stipulated by a customer. It's all very cut and dried and bloodless.

How very different "covenant" is in the Bible and especially in a passage like Jeremiah 31. From the Call of Abram forward, covenant in the Bible is the lifeline of God's relationship with humanity. It's true that, even in the Ancient Near East you can find lots of cut-and-dried legal associations with the various types of covenants that existed back then. But when it came to God's relationship to Israel, covenant was always more than a transaction.

Covenant was life itself. Covenant was hope and promise and grace all rolled into one. The covenant opened up a future for all creation that would not be possible were it not for the existence of the covenant. And if we Christians are now right to believe that all of God's covenant promises found their "Yes" in Christ Jesus, the crucified Lord of lords and King of kings, then we can know for sure that this is a word loaded with meaning.

And so it is in our reading from Jeremiah, this morning on the 5th and last day of Lent, prior to Palm Sunday, which will be celebrated next week. And it is good news. We are told of a new covenant—the assurance of pardon, the transformation of our lives and our life together, a future filled with hope. All of this because God is at work as God always has been, in the midst of his people. There are many stories in the Old Testament about covenants, from Noah and the rainbow through Abraham and Sarah and their many descendants (including us, in Christ) to Moses and the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai. In this week's reading from Jeremiah, the prophet speaks of a covenant—not of stone, not external, but written deep inside, on the very hearts of the people.

Rescue and release—restoration and return—Jeremiah speaks of God's promises to the people of Israel while they are still in captivity, still in exile, steeped in loss and grief that have broken their hearts and their spirits, too. Their city has been destroyed and their conqueror Babylon has carried away their leaders to the far-off capital of its powerful empire. By chapter 31, where we are this morning, Jeremiah is no longer scolding the people for their sin and their lack of faithfulness to God. Instead, Jeremiah brings the people a new message from God. God is trying to tell them something, Jeremiah says, and it's 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 has forgiven them.

In this time of exile God makes sweeping promises to the people of Israel—promises of restoration and return and, most importantly, of relationship, too. Once again, as in so many covenant stories before this one, 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 their God, and they shall be my people.”

Even though they have broken the covenant God made with them back there in the desert, at Sinai with the Ten Commandments—even though things are perhaps the worst they’ve ever been—God is using words like “new” and “heart” and “covenant” once again. The great scholar of the Old Testament, Walter Brueggemann, often writes of the “core memory” of Israel about God: that God will do today, in this bad circumstance, what God has done in the past: “new creation, new covenant, new kingship, new exodus, new land distribution.” God doesn’t do these things merely out of some kind of stubborn faithfulness but out of deep, wounded love and profound grief that have moved God beyond anger to tender caring and, most importantly, to forgiveness.¹ It’s a thing of the heart, in this text: God decides this time that Torah, the Law, will be written not on stones, on something external, but inside, deep inside the people, written on their hearts.

This doesn't mean that the relationship is simply one of feeling because it is written on the heart. In our society, our understanding of “heart” is way too narrow—here we are speaking of a core experience and core identity, not just a feeling. And at that core is forgiveness. The people of Israel have the chance to begin again—and so do we. God has heard our anguished cry for help when we are broken and alienated, and God’s response of forgiveness gives us, too, the chance to begin again.² The gospel claims that the suffering love of God is focused on our brokenness and pain. In Jesus, on the cross, God has experienced the brokenness that must happen in order that we can have a new change.

Jeremiah’s words invite us to think about who God is. None of our words, or anyone else’s, and that means none of the words in the Bible, either—no human words can adequately describe God. We may give it a try but we will fall short every time.

This passage talks about God being their husband or master. The overall sense of this part of the Book of Jeremiah, the *Book of Consolation* as these chapters are called, however, is more like God as a parent. As many of us here are parents, we understand the frustration and anguish that is sometimes experienced in that whole process of parenting. How frustrated God must have been as Israel kept on messing up, and then being moved suddenly and deeply to love and compassion when God remembers how much God loves the people. It is the same for us.

¹ Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy

² The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann

And so it is that we turn again to God, the God of both the Old Testament and the New, with our broken spirits and our sins, our homesickness and loneliness, our hunger for justice for a suffering world, our lost vision and lost hope, the very fabric of our hearts torn open, and we listen for that still-speaking God to address us with words of comfort and consolation, words of rescue and release, of restoration and homecoming. We are captives, in many ways, of very different sorts of empires today, empires of materialism, militarism, and greed.

And yet, paradoxically, we walk in freedom, too, as people of a covenant written on our hearts. We walk in freedom in this in-between time, responding to the call to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God, to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves.

We live, they say, in uncertain times—in transitional times. But what time, we might ask, has ever been “certain”? And yet, in every age, God’s word offers hope to the people. What is the hope that your church longs for? What would its transformation look like? What has that transformation looked like already?

God offers the people of Israel a new covenant. Of the many things that have been said about covenant, perhaps one of the best is that it’s something that each party enters into for the sake of the other—a bit like a marriage. Not for one’s own protection or rights, but for the sake of the other. We know that’s true of God, but is it true of us? Do we do anything purely for God’s own sake? If this covenant is not with individuals but with the people as a community, how does our private faith need to be experienced in the life of a community of faith? Are we often tempted to keep faith a private thing, a “personal relationship with Jesus” that seems to have little to do with this covenant, even a new one, so long ago?

Yes, as Christians, we are all children of the covenant. Remember, Christ did not come to replace the old covenant, but to fulfill it. Through Christ, we are partakers of this new covenant, as is Israel and Judah, and like Israel and Judah, we are promised the opportunity for new life. We are promised forgiveness, pardon and new life with God’s laws written on our hearts—the core of our being.

*Covenant child,
you are claimed as God's own.
You are one of His people.
His church is your home.*

To him be all glory, honour majesty and praise. Amen.