

**Grace Episcopal Church , Galena IL
March 22, 2105 Lent 5B**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
"The Heart of the Matter"
Text -- Jeremiah 31: 31-34**

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....

There's that word again. In our brief snippet of Scripture this morning just four sentences, it is used four times. "Covenant." These past few weeks, we have spanned time and place in the Hebrew Bible to try to understand its fundamental place in the story of faith. We have seen, I hope, that though a covenant is related to ancient treaties or pacts, in a theological sense, it came to have a deeper meaning. One that captures the very heart of Israel's identity and religious beliefs. It expresses, no, it defines, both now and in antiquity, an understanding of the relationship between God and God's people. It is a personal relationship, a binding together of God and humanity, that transcends a legalistic understanding of an agreement between two parties. A personal, but not private or individual, relationship between a people, a community, and their God.

It was a unique concept as it developed in the ancient Middle East where the prevailing religions had multiple gods who were endowed with all-too-human characteristics. Gods who were sometimes capricious and needed to be appeased. From such a time and place emerges one God, YHWH, a God who freely chooses to be in relationship with the people. A God whose love and mercy are pledged to them and who makes an exclusive claim on their loyalty.

We have reflected on the major and everlasting covenants these past Sundays: God's faithful promise to Noah, given with the sign of the rainbow, not only for humanity but for the creatures and the earth itself. There was the covenant with Abraham, the divine promise of the whole land of Canaan and many descendants. It caused Abraham and Sarah to pick up all their earthly possessions, their extended family and livestock and set off across the wilderness into the unknown: when they were well into old age. And then, perhaps the BIGGEST covenant of all, was with Moses on Mount Sinai, as God handed down the tablets containing the Ten Commandments to help the people He had brought out of slavery in Egypt establish their new life together in the Land of Promise.

Some of the covenants are unconditional, that is, they reflect God's continuing commitment and faithfulness no matter what the people do. Those with Noah and Abraham are examples. The covenant with Moses, though, is conditional: it depends upon the obedience of the people to the Law. It is this covenant that is the primary focus of Jeremiah's prophecy. This covenant that the people had broken.

Now, Jeremiah was a quiet, peace-loving man. The last thing he wanted to do was to leave Anathoth, his small town just north of Jerusalem, to rant and rave about the sins of Israel, let alone risk his life. Nevertheless, centuries after Mt. Sinai, long after the people had entered Canaan, established a united kingdom, he was called by God. Like some of the other prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, he resisted, claiming that he was but a youth and did not know how to speak. God, of course, ignored him. God touched his mouth, putting the words within. And for forty years, Jeremiah prophesied. During this time, he saw the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed, Israel and Judah defeated by Assyrian and Babylonian armies, and the people of Israel sent into exile in Babylon. For his trouble, he was imprisoned, put on trial for his life, and thrown into a cistern where he would have died had a friend not saved him at the last minute. It is commonly believed that he was ultimately dragged off to Egypt and stoned to death. This peace-loving man, fired into passion about God, probably seemed crazed to those around him. He rebuked kings and preached to his fellow Jews that they had broken God's heart, breaking the covenant again and again, turning away from YHWH, chasing after other gods.

But in the midst of his harsh and pessimistic message, Jeremiah offers a word of hope to these people who were exiled from their homeland essentially deported to Babylon their Temple and center of worship destroyed. They had lost their identity as a people. Through his prophecy, God announces a heart transplant: the day is coming when there will be a new covenant. It will not be etched on tablets of stone but written within the very hearts of the people, at the core of their being. No longer will there be need for a checklist or book of rules the knowledge of God and God's love will be as close as breath and the beating of hearts. Once again, the promise is profound: *“I will be your God; you will be my people.”*

Now, this promise, this covenant does not void the others. The content of the covenants are not changed. It is the mode and method that changes. God has come back yet again to God's people, reminding them of His never-failing love and faithfulness to them, even when they have not been faithful. This covenant is not inscribed on an external medium like stone tablets it will be placed within the hearts of the people. They will be given the will, the capacity to be faithful. It will be a covenant that they cannot break, because God will do it, and they will be changed in the very core of their being. And they will *“know”* God not know *about* God, but be ready to be in intimate relationship.

For the people of Israel, this covenant, like the others, came at crisis points in their history. This one was integral to their return from exile, establishing new life after the suffering. Christians understand this promise as one that points to Jesus' death and resurrection to Easter.

As we look at Jeremiah's prophecy through the lens of our 21st century lives some 2600 hundred years later, it may be a challenge to understand. The world around us is sorely broken. Sometimes it seems that the brokenness is winning. And when we look inside our own hearts, we may well wonder if we are any more faithful than the Israelites. The gods we chase may be different: gods of busy-ness and distraction, gods of self-interest, success and material wealth. We become captive to harmful habits. We hurt one

another, even those we love most dearly. Our best intentions of loving God and our neighbor become buried beneath other priorities. We are able to know what is good and right, yet we continue to make bad choices.

What would our world look like if all of us lived with God's word written in our hearts? What does it take for us to accept that through all the mistakes, the lack of faithfulness, the wandering and confusion of God's people through the ages, God has not given up. God returns, over and over again to remind us that we are loved and forgiven. Yes, another part of this covenant is this:

for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

We are forgiven and do not have to do anything at all for that. It is God's grace and it is freely given to us. Ah, it is impossible, of course if we try to do it alone. But God can transform our hearts. And transformed hearts have God's love and word written within instead of all of those other messages. You know the ones I mean. Those internal voices like CD tracks that persist in playing over and over again: You are not smart enough. Not good enough. Too fat. Too thin. Unlovable.

Imagine what could happen if our hearts were freed from all of that. If the grating noise would be silenced, replaced with the message, I am your God. You are loved. You are mine. There would be room to live as God intends. Room to truly know and love God and our neighbor. Love all of those whom God loves. Care for all whom God loves by spreading goodness in the world and to actively work toward bringing about God's realm not out of obligation or duty, but out of love. Not because it makes us feel good, but because it is ingrained in who we are.

"Behold the day is coming," said God through Jeremiah, "when I will make a new covenant...I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people." May it be so.

Amen.