

A New Covenant
Jeremiah 31:31-34
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Today we look at the third of our twelve smooth stones- our summer study of well-known Bible passages. I hope that you've found a group to join; the discussions I've been part of are rich times of insight and fellowship. It's not too late; call the church office, or speak with Debbie Handkins to find a location and day of the week. Every Sunday a group meets at 11:00 in our chapel; feel free to join them as well.

Today we're going to look at a passage that is clearly the high point of Jeremiah's prophecies, and is the longest sequence of Old Testament verses to be quoted in the New Testament. Verse 31 is the only time we find the term "new covenant" used in the Hebrew Scriptures, and when translated into Latin, provided the name to be used for the our Christian scriptures; the "New Testament." This is an important text; let's take a look at it together:

(read Jeremiah 31:31-34)

"The time is coming," or more literally, "the days are coming, declares the Lord." This phrase is often used to refer to the Messianic era... a time when help would come the way the cavalry rides in to rescue beleaguered settlers. Last week, Rodney spoke of the Babylonian onslaught; Jerusalem was besieged and would eventually be overrun, and her leaders would be deported into exile. That fate had fallen upon the northern kingdom of Israel, and now it was happening to the southern kingdom of Judah.

People were suffering, and asking about God- the God who had promised them through Moses and David and all the others to uphold them. Some assumed that the Babylonian god Marduke had proven stronger than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob- Yahweh had been consigned to the minor leagues. Others concluded that God just didn't care about them any longer, and simply left them to their fate. More thoughtful folk believed that God was punishing the people of Judah for their sins, just as God had punished the Northern Kingdom several hundred years earlier by wiping them from the face of the map.

We can feel that way sometimes. We do something inappropriate, engage in some sin hidden to everyone else but God, indulge some bad habits, or do something we know to be ugly or hateful or wrong... and then when things go bad... we feel as if God's gonna get us for that. Sometimes, the feeling is overwhelming... a child suffers, and we conclude it must be because we sinned... neglected her upbringing in some way, and the sins of the parents are visited upon the children. We're not the first to feel that way; as Jeremiah put it two verses earlier, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge," and we find the roots of modern family systems thinking being exposed.

But, Jeremiah won't let us blame our actions on our parents... in the very next verse, he points out everyone dies for his or her own sin. You and I are held accountable for our own shortcomings, and each one of us has to deal with consequences of our own actions. The Babylonians are camped outside your gates- not your parent's fortified walls. You've got to come to grips with your sinfulness for yourself; after all, you've

blown your share of the “I’m going to be good” promises you made to God, and God is calling on his people to pay the price... and that’s gonna hurt- a lot.

Like any parent, God appears to be backed into a corner. Truth is, God has to be function according the contract he made... live justly and I will be your God; live unjustly, and I won’t. Embrace me, and I will embrace you; turn away from me and I will turn away from you. That’s the bad news, and Jeremiah doesn’t pull any punches in telling it... and the Babylonian troops parked outside the gates of the city were there to prove it.

Yet, God still loves you and me like any parent, wants a deep relationship with his beloved; in verse 32, we’re reminded of the intimate relationship God established with the people of God as he took them by the hand and led them out from Egypt into the Sinai desert: “I was a husband to them.” As deep as that runs, the steadfastness of God’s tough love for us stands... and it grieves God tremendously to turn away whenever we sin- but God must, because that’s the deal God made. The absence of God in our lives exposes us to misfortune, hurt and isolation... despair and ruin... and like any loving parent, watching that happen to us hurts God more than any of us know... and the prophet Jeremiah is spiritually sensitive enough to know it.

What makes this morning’s passage so significant is that Jeremiah pushes into deeper water and new territory. The nature of God’s contract with us doesn’t change- it can’t. The terms of the deal- engraved on stone tablets- endures. The covenant doesn’t change, but God’s strategy for dealing with us does. The law is still written in stone, but that’s no longer all- some day, Jeremiah prophecies, it’s going to be engraved on our hearts and in our minds as well. No longer is God’s will an outside-in code of conduct- a

rulebook to follow. It's going to become an inside-out way of life meant to govern the way we live. No longer is the law meant just for scholars who can read Hebrew, it's for everyone... kings and peasants, British Petroleum execs and shrimp boat fishermen, Bernie Madoff and every single penny-pinching widow, Barack Obama and John Boehner, for you and for me; "from the least of them to the greatest" is how Jeremiah put it. Some people might call it your conscience; others might call it something else... but there it is, and we ignore every impulse to do the right thing at risk to our happiness and sense of fulfillment in life- because God's law is written on our hearts.

Mind you, this was written 600 years before Christ... and what I love about it is that it demonstrates Jeremiah looking past the present-day calamities of his age to sense God doing a new thing... with the focus on "new." He mounted up, as it were, with wings like an eagle to peer over the edge of his time, and what he saw was the hand of God at work. His words reflect some out-of-the-box thinking about God, setting the stage for the work and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Let me say a word about this covenant- old and new- and what the literal Hebrew words tell us. Long ago, whenever a binding agreement, or covenant, was made between a powerful sovereign and a lesser person... an animal- a sheep perhaps- would be cut in half and the two participants in the contract would pass together between the two bloody halves. It feels sort of crude, but that's the way they did it... maybe as a non-verbal way of saying that this bloody dead animal demonstrates what will happen if the covenant is violated. We can find examples of "cutting a covenant" all over ancient literature, and the literal Hebrew in today's passage describes God "cutting a new covenant" with his people.

Friends, what Jeremiah's prophecy foresaw was Christ's death on the cross cutting a new covenant for us, allowing us access to a sovereign God. Jesus' words make a bit more sense when he took the cup and somewhat surprisingly said of it: "this cup is the new covenant in my blood..." In passing through the blood of Jesus, we enter into a new, inside-out relationship with God.

Are you up to it? You know some of the garbage laying around in your own heart, and the broken-down places in your own life. Push a bit deeper into what this text for Jeremiah teaches us.... There is no way the holy law of God could possibly exist in your blackened heart unless God's grace goes there first to clean it out first; your sin and God's law are like oil and water... they simply can't share the same space. Let me tell you, friend: the blood of Jesus means that God's grace is already at work in you, cleaning the oily sin from the gulf waters of your heart. Jeremiah's words describe God's grace acting like an oil skimmer laying down booms and dispersants: "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (31:34) Ask for help by inviting God's Spirit into some of the back bays and hidden marshes of your life; God is anxious to respond.

Pass by the cross of Christ, and through his bloody sacrifice- you're given access to all the oily-sin cleansing power you need, and God's new-covenant promise pours his will- the law- into our hearts. I read once of a high-jumper who, in describing the reason for his success, said that he threw his heart over the pole and the rest of his body just followed. Let God clean you up, and then following your new covenant heart will get you over the bar into the Kingdom of God.

Jeremiah's prophecy isn't yet complete, is it? Jeremiah looked at the circumstances of his people, and saw God doing something new. How about you? Can you look at the failure of your life, and see opportunity? Can you look at the dirty water you live with, and see a glass half-full of clean water? Can you consider the disasters in your life, and sense God as the holy potter gathering up all the broken pieces of clay to craft something new?

Today, we're ordaining and installing three new leaders willing provide spiritual "Jeremiah" leadership to help us as a church do just that- people who want to help God call the best out of us all. Two new Deacons, and one new Elder- each in his or her own way willing to serve Christ by serving you, helping us all to live into the new covenant. I'd like to invite Clerk Dan Oerhle to join me in welcoming these disciples into the leadership of the church.