

Written on Our Hearts – Jeremiah 31:31-34 – March 18, 2018

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Our lesson this morning from the prophet Jeremiah reveals to us yet another covenant that God makes with the people of Israel. This is necessary because the Israelites did not uphold their part of a previous covenant. Here Jeremiah refers to the covenant that came through Moses on Mount Sinai, the covenant of the law. God had given the people the law as a way of existing in loving relationships – both with God and with other humans. It was an outline of the life that God intended for humans to enjoy – one in which people could live with one another peacefully and experience a loving relationship with God. But with even this set of rules to live by, the people would not comply. Personal interest and love of self more than others got in the way.

The consequence of this failure to uphold the law, according to Jeremiah, was that they were defeated by the Babylonians – their capital city Jerusalem was in ruins, and many of the people were taken away to live in Babylon. As at other times when faced with hardship, the Israelites realized their guilt and longed for a way to make things right again. To get back into God's good graces.

So Jeremiah spoke to them about a new covenant that God was planning. This was a word of hope to the people in exile. It was a promise of new life coming out of the ashes of destruction. It was an assurance that despite the unfaithfulness of the people toward God, God would remain faithful to them. This covenant would be different in that through it, God would be made known to them. They wouldn't just be given a list of rules to follow, like the stone tablets that Moses brought down from the mountain, but those very laws would be internalized. Jeremiah uses the metaphor of the law being written directly on their hearts, or in other words, the people would know God intimately, and in that knowing, they would live as God created them to live.

For those people living in exile, this word of promise gave them hope for the future – a future made new for them out of God's love for them. Through this new covenant, the relationship between God and humans would be intimate. And out of our great love for God, our desire would be to live as God hopes for us to live.

One of the commentators of this passage used the analogy of falling in love with another person. When we are in love, our thoughts are focused on the other. We feel like our very souls are connected. Our actions are done with the other's best interests in mind. Our number one desire is to please and show our devotion to our beloved. Life becomes full of

meaning. Beauty and passion are felt deeply, and we feel a fulfillment and wholeness that we've never known before. It truly is a marvelous experience.

And while the analogy is not without its flaws, it does give us an idea of what it might be like to have an intimate knowledge of God. To know God on a personal level, and to want to follow God because of that.

Christians often see in this passage a reference to the coming of Jesus – that Jesus is the embodiment of this new covenant. We believe that in the life and ministry of Jesus we see the love of God for others in action. That in following him, we draw closer to that life which God desires for us. In Jesus we see God's love incarnate, and as our hearts and wills are molded by what he taught, we move closer to living out that life of compassion and justice for others that God has wanted for us all along.

Now, while we know are on this journey of walking alongside Jesus, we also know that we still have a long way to go. Our hearts are fickle, and just like our Israelite ancestors in faith, we turn away from God, putting our own desires in the forefront. And like them, we also repent and come back. In fact, that is what this season of Lent is about. Examining where we are on this journey of faith, and allowing God's Spirit to move us back on track.

So while we Christians believe that Jesus is the embodiment of God's new covenant that was promised, we also understand that it has not yet been fully realized. The writing of the law on our hearts has begun, but we know it's a work in progress. So we live in this tension of what theologians like to call "the already, but not-yet." Christ has already come, God's covenant with us has commenced, but the full realization of it has not yet occurred. We probably won't see the fulfillment of the promise in our lifetimes, but we have hope that what has already begun in Christ will continue forward toward full realization...sometime.

That is the hope that we hold onto. That this is not just an exercise in futility. We follow Christ because we know what Jesus taught is the right way, the only way, the path toward complete wholeness. We do not succumb to despair when we see how our world has been impacted by greed and violence and self-interest and oppression and every "-ism" under the sun. But we hold onto the promise that in Jesus Christ, God has already begun a new thing. God has delivered the covenant, because in Christ we have been made a new creation, and through Jesus, we can know God's love.