

“A New Covenant”
Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
March 22, 2015 Lent 5B

Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

Have you ever lived in a place ravaged by war? The closest I’ve ever come was during the attacks of 9/11. Even those of us who didn’t lose any close friends or relatives were shaken to the bone. But at least we still had a functioning government to step in and help. We had fire-fighters and police, rescue crews, social workers, and religious organizations, and they were there immediately. Supplies and people of good will came streaming in from all over the country to help. It’s hard to imagine what life would be like if everything were destroyed and we had to put our lives back together, surrounded by enemies, as people do today in the Middle East or North Africa. Where can someone find hope in the midst of devastation?

In the scripture lesson that Leah read this morning, the prophet Jeremiah delivered a message of hope in a devastating time, after the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. Babylonian soldiers reduced the grandest building, the temple, to rubble. They destroyed domestic animals and crops, and burned homes to the ground. The king and his family, the priests, prophets, and all the leaders were all either killed or exiled. Anyone with any skill to help was dead or gone. And the Jewish people who were left were overwhelmed with grief and fear, and many were homeless and hungry. Those who were sent into exile had to start over with nothing, strangers in a hostile land, with a foreign language and unfriendly neighbors.

Up until the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah’s message was one of judgment – calling God’s people to mend their ways, turn back to God, and God would save them from their enemies. But no one listened or took the message to heart. And so their lives were destroyed. Now, Jeremiah brought a message of consolation and hope. God was offering them another chance, a new beginning, a promise of restoration. God said, “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”

There was nothing new about the *content* of this covenant. In the old covenant, they were to worship God and only God. And they were to treat others as God had treated them, with mercy and love. So for example, they should forgive the debts of people in their community and be generous to people in need, because they were once slaves in the land of Egypt, and God had set them free (Deut. 15:7-15). They were to love strangers and treat them fairly, because they were once strangers in Egypt (Deut. 10:19). And that old covenant was supposed to still be in effect, although the people had broken it.

So what was new? The *content* was the same, but the covenant was to come from a different place. The old covenant was written down in laws and imposed on the people from outside. The new covenant would come from within them. It would be written on their hearts. Everyone would know it, not just the priests and leaders, but everyone, from

the least to the greatest. They would all know the Lord. They wouldn't just know *about* God. It was an intimate relationship, and expressed in the way they lived, as Jeremiah wrote to King Jehoiakim in chapter 22: "Is not *this* what it means to know me?" The king was not to set his heart on dishonest gain, shed innocent blood, or practice oppression and violence. Instead he was to do justice and righteousness, and judge the cause of the poor and needy (vs. 15-17). When you do those things, you know the Lord.

The new covenant was expressed in acts of love and justice, and it was to come from the heart. Everyone would know God and live according to God's ways. And most important, the new covenant was based on forgiveness and generosity, God's forgiveness and generosity toward the people, as it says in verse 34, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Now Jeremiah's prophecy was not meant for the distant future. It was for God's people to realize when they came out of exile. And they did come out of exile and return to their homeland. They rebuilt the Temple and the city, and established social and religious reforms. But the reforms didn't last forever. So the prophecy was not completely fulfilled. And so when the New Testament writers wrote of Jesus, they still had this prophecy in mind.

During Jesus' last supper with his disciples, the bread and cup became a sign of a new covenant with God. This new covenant is also based in love and forgiveness. And like Jeremiah's new covenant, there's nothing new in the content that I can think of. What's new about it is that it's realized through Christ, as it says in 2nd Corinthians (5:19), "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them..." Whereas Jeremiah delivered a message in words, Jesus himself – in all that he said and did and was, is God's message of love to us. And in Holy Week, we see the climax of that message. Jesus did not shrink from suffering, but was faithful in the face of evil, and poured out his life to show us the way of integrity, forgiveness and self-sacrificing love.

Sonia read from the gospel of John this morning, some Greeks were in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. They came to Philip and said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." So Philip got his friend Andrew and they went and told Jesus about it. But as far as we know, Jesus did not invite the Greeks over for a chat. Instead he started telling Philip and Andrew about the hour of his death. Just as a grain of wheat has to fall into the earth and die before it can bear fruit, so must the Son of Man die, and be lifted up from the earth to draw all people to God.

When Jesus finished speaking to Philip and Andrew, it says he "departed and hid from them." (vs. 36). It was not the time to chat with some Greeks. If the Greeks wanted to see Jesus, they would see him pour out his life in faithfulness to the truth, and stretch out his arms to touch our hearts and draw us in.

We are now in the last week of Lent. Lent is a time to take in the passion of Christ, his passion for God, and the suffering he was willing to take to demonstrate God's

ways. Lent is also a season for self-reflection. It's a time to look honestly at ourselves and our society, and confess where we have fallen short or broken God's covenant with us. Where have we turned our hearts away from God and walked in our own ways? Where have we shed innocent blood, practiced oppression and violence, and neglected justice and righteousness?

This year racism has come to the surface in our society, not only in the use of force by police, but also in the many and various reactions to this use of force. Some people reacted in anger and demonstrated. And others reacted to the anger and demonstrations with more anger and racist remarks. Still, some of us are becoming more aware of the extent of systemic racism among us. And then recently, the Oklahoma frat boys made it obvious with their racist songs, "You can hang (a nigger) from a tree, but he can never sign with me." All of this shows we still have a long way to go before we can say we truly know the Lord in our hearts.

During Lent we also look for signs of faithfulness, and signs of Jesus' presence among us. And here's one. After the Sigma Alpha Epsilon frat house was closed down by the University of Oklahoma, it was vandalized by graffiti, and some of its members received death threats. But Isaac Hill, the president of the Black Students Association, called for forgiveness. He said the school did the right thing in closing the house, but people should not fight hate with hate. So he invited the fraternity brothers to meet with his group and talk. He wanted them to understand why their singing was offensive, but he also hoped everyone could learn and grow from this experience. I don't know whether anyone accepted his invitation or not. But this was a gesture of love and forgiveness. Hill said, "Let's not let their hate spark hate with us. Let's just let their hate spark love with us, and let them learn..."

What signs of faithfulness have you seen in the weeks of Lent? And where have you seen Jesus? Maybe you experienced Christ in the quiet meditation of a Taize service, or at the communion table here, where people from different walks of life and language groups gather as one body before God. I saw hearts open to God in those who responded when the Dindial family lost their home in a fire last month. A few people from our church brought them meals, even though they were not personal friends, or people they knew well at all. And I see Christ in one of our members who quietly volunteers as an advocate for elderly patients at Bergen Regional, who have no family to look out for their interests. Jesus is present wherever people are living out the law of God from the heart, and show forgiveness, compassion and love.

Jesus said, "Whoever serves me will follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also." May we keep our hearts open this week, and be faithful to God's covenant of forgiveness and love.

In Jesus' name. Amen.