

5 Lent – Year B – April 1, 2009
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51: 1-13; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33
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I think I had all kinds of Bible studies on my mind this week. Tonight's reading from the prophet Jeremiah is, I hope you'll agree, simply beautiful, especially the part that goes "I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." And the reason I was thinking of yet another Bible study group, was that this passage about our hearts brought to mind Marybeth and the prayer she always prayed before our women's group Bible study. It went along the lines of this. "Lord, make our hearts all squishy to receive your Word." It's a great prayer and very apt for Lent. It is a good reminder that our hearts can become wooden, or even turn to stone, and that is not what God desires.

Amazingly, in this short and intriguing passage from Jeremiah, there are several facets to the promise of the new covenant. In my Jewish Study Bible, the commentary is refreshingly curt in its honesty in speaking to this passage. The author explains how in the Christian tradition, the new covenant is interpreted as being the coming of Jesus, but in the Jewish tradition, this passage is about a new covenant with Israel and Judah, after the Babylonian exile. Both are true because the Hebrew Scriptures are part of our Judeo-Christian tradition, and Jesus did institute the new covenant. But it is also true because the prophets did speak about the current situation of their people, and, as we shall see, their prophetic messages have echoes across time.

Just like the first covenant made with the Israelites through the mediation of Moses, the new covenant that Jeremiah speaks of is to be God's initiative. According to the prophet, the Mosaic covenant is now broken, and so God has determined to put an end to the history of brokenness, and begin a new kind of history with His people. It will truly be a return from exile, unlike any other in the history of the Israelites. Given the overall pattern of the Book of Jeremiah, we also know that the experience of exile brought a shift in the prophetic messages from oracles of judgment to oracles of salvation. Within our own Christian faith tradition, it's easy to see how we would interpret Jeremiah as speaking of the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, when we can see and hear the evident shift towards salvation in the prophetic writings. Furthermore, given how the Word of God is so multi-faceted and has multiple layers of meaning, there is no reason to think that just one interpretation of a specific text will go unchanged across the deserts and through the oceans of time. Indeed, Bernard Anderson writes that Jeremiah is like "a finely cut jewel, [with a] prophecy that reflects light from several facets."

We do well to consider why God would need to inaugurate a new covenant at all? After all, most of the prophets simply call to the Israelites to repent and return to the Lord. However, it seems that the brokenness amongst God's people cannot be fixed simply, and that God, as always, has a better plan. The new covenant is new in the sense that it will actually fulfill the original intent of the covenant made with Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The necessity stems from the fact that the old covenant has become distorted by religiosity: including ceremonies that God did not intend; and a surfeit of interpretative laws that put an unintended burden on the people. There will be no mistaking the new covenant because God intends to write it on our hearts, literally at the heart of our being. The new covenant is what God always wanted the covenant to be -- an intimate and personal relationship between each of us and God.

God then speaks of a new community that arises out of the new covenant, "they shall be my people." In other words, through the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, God will make a new type of community. This is a new community of people, Israel and Judah, the whole of the company that was brought out of slavery and exile in Egypt. Even so, within the community, the covenant will be true

for each individual. It will no longer just be the leaders of Israel, kings or otherwise who are God's representatives on earth. In the new covenant, every single member of the community will know God, because God's law will be written on our hearts. The individual hearts of the members of God's new community of people will also be so aligned to God's will that there will be no need for teachers of the Law. Just as importantly, this is a new community where everyone is equal, as God says, "for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

Appropriately, as we come to the end of the season of Lent, the new covenant Jeremiah speaks of rests upon divine forgiveness. Jeremiah teaches us that God's forgiveness is always preceded by God's discipline, wherein our human pride, self-centeredness, independent ways and our idols are all shattered and brought down, revealing to us that there is only One true God, who desires to be at the center of our hearts, minds, and lives. For the Israelites, God promises to forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no longer. For Christians, you and I are clothed in righteousness by God's grace and our faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Our sins were nailed to the cross, once, for all.

In Christ, we know that the Last Days began with His death and resurrection, and we look forward to His coming again in glory, when all God's promises and plans for creation will reach their final consummation – their final fulfillment. For the Israelites, the promise of the last days is that God's promises are to be fulfilled in Zion, the Promised Land, where God led the Israelites to settle after leaving Egypt and wandering in the wilderness under God's providential care for forty years. I'd like to leave us with one final thought tonight from William Penn, who wrote, "[Humanity] may tire themselves in a labyrinth of search, and talk of God; but if we would know Him indeed, it must be from the impressions we receive of Him; and the softer our hearts are, the deeper and livelier those will be upon us." Dear God, make our hearts all squishy to receive your Word, and do you will.

Amen.