

Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28, 31:31-34

Today, we fast-forward from last week's Isaiah passage and the late eighth century BCE to the reign of Jehoiakim during the early sixth century BCE. Many of the fears of the eighth century have befallen on Judah, though partially delayed in time, and executed through the Babylonians and not the Assyrians.

Once again, God addresses this crisis through a prophet.

We need to remember that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible were not telling the future, although that is an understandable misconception given the way later Christian writers interpreted prophetic books as pointing to Jesus Christ. Rather, the prophets were ancient social and political commentators, figures who paid attention to what was going on politically and socially in their own contexts, and interpreted current events in terms of the people's relationship with the Lord.

Understanding themselves as having a call from God to speak out against injustice and other societal issues, sometimes to the king or other political leaders and sometimes to the population at large, prophets would proclaim "the word of the LORD", often calling for changes in behaviour and attitude.

Jeremiah had a long and very challenging vocation as a prophet in the kingdom of Judah. Serving as a prophet for more than 40 years, he lived through a very tumultuous time in Judah's history.

God commands Jeremiah to write God's words onto a scroll to preserve these texts for future generations, to look back at the calamity they were facing, as an impetus to their repentance and divine forgiveness. Obediently, Jeremiah calls on his scribe Baruch to record the words of the Lord.

This passage models a major transition of revelation. Archaeological evidence suggests that ancient Judah is witnessing a growing literacy, thus it is natural that God would utilize newer forms of communication. Whereas two centuries earlier in Isaiah, an angelic being touches the lips of Isaiah with a hot coal, now, the command is to write the prophetic word. One can consider the differences between the preservation of national narratives through oral tradition versus written practices. Jeremiah understands that these very words can have value beyond the present generation.

Because of Jeremiah's banishment from the temple, he sends Baruch to read the words of the scroll during the midst of a fasting ceremony. Both the space and time are set for a redemptive reading of the words of the Lord. But when the scroll is read to the court, this

time by Jehudi, the response to the word of God is obtrusive.

The king is perhaps too consumed with his own luxuries to understand the precariousness of the situation. Jeremiah expresses a particularly biting indictment of those of us who enjoy privilege: *“The king in a winterized part of the palace, sitting in front of a fire to keep warm.”* If we enjoy positions of power in regards to our gender, ethnicity, class, marital status, etc., we must take care that such privilege does not overshadow our own ability to listen to God’s Word.

King Jehoiakim’s response, though deplorable, is not surprising in that the destruction of the prophetic words is natural for a ruler who is both paranoid and massively self-absorbed. This is one of the earliest recorded narratives of “book burning” to suppress an ideology. But as in most cases, this book burning is not a terribly effective strategy for ideological control. Instead of eliminating the word of God, Jeremiah shows that it is more powerful and lasting than the actions of a narcissistic king. The words of Jeremiah continue to find power two millennia later.

King Jehoiakim is merely a footnote as a disobedient king. But the destruction is not total. Before the fall, Jeremiah has prophesied about a new covenant - a new covenant, a new way of directing how

we live with each other and with God.

The story of Scripture is inextricably bound with the idea of covenant. After the flood God makes a covenant with Noah. Later God makes a covenant with Abram/Abraham. In the Exodus and at Sinai God makes a covenant with the people of Israel. Each covenant involves promises and expectations from both sides.

The life of faith is full of covenant imagery. We not only tell the story of faith and the covenants within that, we make covenants. When we are baptized, and when we re-affirm our baptism, we enter into and renew a covenant. When we dedicate our lives to one special partner we enter into a covenant. When we call a new minister to serve with a faith community we have a service of covenanting to begin that relationship. And again there are promises and expectations between all parties.

God is always faithful to the covenants. God's people on the other hand ... Well ... Within Israel and Judah, the work of the prophets was to call people back to living out the covenant. They are less than successful. What is a God to do? Oral reminders have not worked. The written reminder is subject to destruction. What if the covenant is written in the very beings of the people? Will that work? Could it work?

So, what is a covenant? Testament is Latin for Covenant. The Old and New Testaments are really Old and New Covenants. The people of the Bible understood covenants well.

They made covenants daily to define and describe their relationship with one another. The fundamental difference between covenants and other agreements is the relationship established between the covenant makers. This relationship went far beyond legal concepts. Covenanted parties viewed each other as friends who were bound together permanently. To be in covenant was to be in relationship.

In the midst of the Babylonian takeover of Zion, Jeremiah's consolation culminates in a new covenant with the following characteristics: It is Inclusive, not divisive. It includes both the northern and southern kingdoms. This is a remarkable break from the tensions and outright animosity between the two kingdoms, which continued through the life of Christ; the participants explicitly include the "least to the greatest". *'For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will already know me', says the Lord.*

It is Lawful, not lawless. The new covenant will build on the Torah of God. Now, the people have a new strategy for staying faithful to God. It will centre on the written word. It is better to think of a Torah in the sense of God's "teaching", rather than New Testament

constructs of Torah as legalism. Torah was an expression of how the community could maintain covenantal fidelity.

It is Divine, not human. Whereas the older covenant was broken by the people, God pre-empts this possibility by making Himself the primary agent of the new covenant. Note the first person emphasis, *“But this is the new covenant that I will make with the people on that day,” says the LORD: I will put my laws in their minds, and I will write them on their hearts; I will be their God.”*

When it comes to the word heart, it has even more meaning in Hebrew than it does in English. In English heart can mean emotion and it can mean that in Hebrew. But it also includes will or intent. So when God talks about having the covenant written on the people’s hearts it means that they will intentionally enter into a relationship with God. The Israelites are “all in”. The word “know” just like the word heart, means much more in Hebrew than in English. In Hebrew it also refers to knowing someone more intimately, something that happens through the sharing of experiences and commitment. This is why in the Bible the word know can be used as a euphemism for sex, as any giggling confirmant can tell you. Here the word is obviously not talking about sex. It is saying that the relationship God seeks is one that is intimate and not distant. A covenant is relational, not distant.

The earlier covenant was intimate in that it involved a God who “takes by the hand” and the metaphor of marriage. The new covenant incorporates these features in that they will fully know the Lord in both intellectual acknowledgement, but also inclusive in the intimate ideals that they will know the Lord and be known by Him.

The covenant is not simply an agreement between two parties. What God is describing is a relationship, more like a marriage than the signing of a contract. This means that when the covenant between God and the Israelites was broken, it was not the breaking of a contract, but more like a breakup between lovers or friends. This was an example of what Israel had done to God over and over again.

Seeing the covenant as a relationship is also the reason why a new one is necessary. Just as a marriage can be ended by divorce and if the two want to get back together, there has to be a new marriage - a new covenant. The Mosaic covenant/ relationship was broken by Israel’s sin. A new covenant meant a new beginning.

God remains faithful to the covenants. God's people ... well sometimes and even often we struggle, we miss the mark at times - our aim seems 180 degrees off. Most significantly, the new covenant is indeed new!

The cloud of sin no longer hangs above the community. For God declares, *“For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”* With the freedom from sin, the people can now move forward in their relationship with God.

This new covenant is much more protective and lasting. In the midst of the Babylonian sufferings, it enables the faithful to be grateful to God. Although politically oppressed, with little economic hope and an unknown future, the covenant of God brings rise to thanksgiving to all.

For many years Christians have looked at those verses in Jeremiah and have seen Christ. Jesus is said to have instituted **the** - or at least **a** - new covenant, the one that would be written on our hearts. And so we are people of the New Covenant.

Using covenants is God’s way of communicating with us, redeeming us, and assuring us eternal life in Jesus. The Bible is a covenant document. God’s covenant relationship with his people highlights the degree of his love for us. Not only does the great sovereign Creator of heaven and earth descend to be in relationship with sinful human beings, but he offers his own life to provide escape for covenant breakers.

The birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of God's covenant with his people. God had come to redeem his people, raise up the horn of salvation and fulfill his holy covenant with Abraham.

Our relationship with Christ is based on a covenant. His body – the Lamb of God himself – was torn and broken, and we eat the covenant meal as we partake of communion and we remember that God has bound himself to us in covenant love.

At the Last Supper, Jesus proclaimed that the wine-cup represented his own blood which would be the blood of the new covenant. The cup represented the “new covenant in my blood”. Just as the covenant with Moses was sealed with blood – the new covenant was satisfied when Jesus' blood was poured out on the cross. We renew that covenant and reaffirm our commitment to it, when we drink the wine and eat the bread, remembering the Lord's death, until he returns. The Lord's Supper is a visible and tangible reminder of the covenant.

Jesus is the Messenger and the Mediator of the new covenant. It is an eternal covenant, guaranteed by Jesus. It is a covenant that is renewed weekly, every time we partake of the Lord's Supper. It is not a static covenant but a changing and renewable one – like marriage vows that are renewed or a baptism that is remembered

and affirmed.

What makes the covenant so powerful is that it is based on love and compassion – not law. After all we were made to be covenant people – meant to live in relationship with God and with one another. Our world is changing, our church needs to change with it – to be constantly re-forming in order to remain relevant. We need to continually renew our relationships and covenants. We need to ask God for a new vision - for a new covenant: between God and God's people, between God and the church, between congregations and pastors, between congregations and synods, and between congregations themselves. Covenants – like the Lord's Supper need regular renewal.

Christ is the new covenant of God, signed, sealed, and delivered in the blood of the Lamb. Allow God to write this on your heart, and experience this extraordinary act of forgiveness. God's intent was always to establish a new covenant. This new covenant of love is found in the life, death, burial, resurrection of Jesus Christ. I invite us all to be a part of this new covenant as it is written on our hearts as beloved children of God, and exemplified in our living.

Reign of Christ Sunday is a day when we remind ourselves that we are citizens of a different Kingdom, when we remind ourselves that

we follow a different law. It is also a time of transition, the end of one liturgical year and the start of a new one. Next Sunday we start the new liturgical year with Advent 1. And so it seems appropriate that this Sunday as we talk about the covenant - that it be placed in our minds and written on our hearts.

Amen.

PRAYERS of the People for NOVEMBER 24, 2024

Christ the King Sunday

As the shepherd who cares for the flock, loving God, you guide all things through Jesus whom you have exalted over all Creation as our sovereign Lord and our Redeemer. Hear the prayers we offer in his name for the Creation he cherished and that you entrust to us.

We pray for the church universal, your living hands and feet in the world, that we may remain faithful in continuing Jesus' ministry of healing and reconciliation by reaching out to all who are alienated or marginalised. We pray for greater integrity that we may both speak and live the virtues that are planted deep within our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit. Equip and empower us that we may place our strength, talents, time and energy in the service of Christ; to become more Christ-like in our lifelong journey of discipleship. May we be authentic witnesses to God's kin-dom come near.

We pray for each of us: that we may live our lives fearlessly and with hope in the midst of a world that is broken and hurting. In the face of all the evidence that we are bombarded with that we live in a world of horrors, perhaps it is simply a Hall of Mirrors, with reality warped into something that is not truly so. Goodness is warped into evil. Love is warped into hate. Religion is warped into violence. Hope is warped into despair. Faith is warped into oppression. Yet you, Holy God, you have taught us that "faith, hope and love abide" despite all the evils of our world, and that "the greatest of those is love". Help us to remain rooted in the true power of your everlasting love.

Merciful God, your enduring love can transform even the worst into something good. At this very moment, we pray that you send your transforming love into the worst of wars and conflicts around the world: the wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, Lebanon, Sudan, and Haiti. Bring about peace to all areas of our world torn apart by war, conflict and violence.

For all those recovering from the trauma of being displaced — by flood and fire, war and famine: May they be fed and cared for, and may they find kindness on their journeys, that God will provide the assistance which they need. Protect them from further harm, comfort them, and equip and guide all who are trying to assist them.

We pray for the leaders of all nations: that they may be guided by God's wisdom in promoting the well-being of all members of society, in protecting the powerless, and in promoting justice, in changing and reforming oppressive systems so that all may have access to opportunities, to enjoy freedom, and to experience a flourishing life.

We pray for: Peace Lutheran in Abbotsford - Rev. Dean Andersen, Emmaus Lutheran in Burnaby - Rev. Timo Saarinen; our sister congregation in Peru and Pastor Ana Maria Jara; the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Acting Anglican Primate Anne Germond, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. Bless all joint initiatives in worship, fellowship and service to the community.

We pray for all who struggle with life's demands, the poor, the lonely, and those with mental illness, addictions and physical illness, especially Bishop Kathy, Pastor Kristen Steele, and Ian and Jean McKain, that God will sustain them, surround them with lovingkindness and support, and touch the hearts of many to be compassionate friends.

Merciful God, we pray for those who are lonely and long for human companionship; those who are persecuted and judged just because of who they are. When we feel inadequate or overwhelmed by all the sorrows and struggles around us, O God, allow ourselves to feel, and give us compassion to lead us to do what we can with your help, trusting that we are able to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

We pray for the grace of forgiveness: that we may be moved to forgive all who have injured us and show concern and compassion for them.

We pray those who have lost loved ones through death, alienation, or through other circumstances. For all who are grieving and for all who are approaching death: that they may entrust themselves into God's loving embrace and be healed of all their wounds. And for all who have died: that Christ may welcome them into the fullness of life where sorrow and pain exist no more.

Loving God, who looks with loving compassion on all of your creation, we lift up our prayers to you. Look upon your people who rejoice in your justice and mercy, and grant that the prayers we offer may reveal Christ's reign of love, mercy, peace and grace in our time.

Amen

Let us pray together as Jesus taught ...

Our Father ...