

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

---

“A time is coming when I will make a new covenant.” This is what God declares through the prophet Jeremiah. “A time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah...I will put my Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

We need to be careful about how we hear this astonishing promise from God.

For some Christians, Jeremiah’s prophecy refers to the stories and teachings in what we call the New Testament. And we can trust that God’s covenant with us *is* revealed through Jesus Christ. However, trusting Christian scripture as God’s continuing revelation does not mean that God’s pre-existing covenant with the Jews is invalid.

For some Christians and even some Jews, God’s promise of restoration adds fuel to Zionistic expansion into Palestine. And while we can all trust God’s renewed covenant with the children of Israel, to have any hope of understanding, we need to hear these words in context.

What is “new” here is not a new religion that replaces an older one. What is “new” here is not a new nation that is free to occupy another. What *is* new is a deepened process and widened capacity for hearing and responding to God.

Through Jeremiah, God promises to put the covenant into the people's inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts because even with the best teachers, prophets and priests, the people were not learning God's teachings and so failed to live up to their part.

The people stood accused of breaking their covenant with God. They had been treating the covenant that God made at Mt. Sinai like a contract; a legal arrangement that could be dissolved if one party didn't fulfill a responsibility.

For Jeremiah, the people's failure to satisfy their obligations had brought about consequences. He saw the downfall of his homeland as the Babylonians invaded the southern kingdom of Judah and attacked Jerusalem, destroying the temple and exiling or killing most of the population. The Assyrians had done much the same to Israel, the northern kingdom, more than a century earlier.

The people were apparently incapable of being true to God. Fortunately, God *was and is* just as incapable of being anything *less* than true with the children of Israel.

Hebrew Scripture is filled with stories about the people's continual inability to remain in right relationship with God and God's equally continual pursuit of right relationship with the people. And so here, once again, God tells the people that forgiveness and restoration will come.

God's promise through Jeremiah is more earthly than spiritual. More specific than universal. God makes this promise of a renewed relationship with a specific group of people – discouraged people dispirited by their exile in Babylon. Until God's new covenant took root with the people of the house of Israel and the house of Judah, it could not be for anyone else.

Unlike a contract that has exterior motivations, Jeremiah envisioned an interior force abiding in the human heart; something more like the commitment to a relationship made in marriage. A true *covenant*, rather than a contract, where even if a promise is broken, the relationship continues with iniquities forgiven and sins unremembered.

God promised to help the people stay true by engraving the necessary resources – God’s teaching – within their very hearts. The foundation of the new covenant is the relationship that God has been extending to Israel since giving Moses the tablets: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

We began this morning by reciting words from those tablets; the Ten Utterances, the Decalogue, that remind us who we are and who God is. The original covenant was written in stone. God wrote the new covenant on the people’s hearts.

Now, remember, for the ancients, the heart was not just the seat of our emotions, but the center of human will and reason; the core of our identity. A closed heart, separated from the influence of God, leads to bad choices.

Jeremiah was convinced that the sins of his people were “engraved by an iron pen with a diamond point on the tablets of their hearts.” Their hearts were so overwritten with sin that they could not make righteous choices.

God had to give the people new hearts, changed wills, so that they had the *ability* to return to right relationship with God, and in this way, come to an intimate knowledge of the Holy One in a committed, loving and mutual relationship. Kabbalistic Judaism claims that, with that act, God placed the Divine spark within the hearts of all people. Even yours and mine.

Let me tell you a story.

Author and professor Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen was attending a physicians’ seminar on listening. The doctors got out their stethoscopes to spend some time listening to their own hearts.

At first, of course, the room full of middle-aged doctors started anxiously trying to diagnose themselves. But as time passed, they moved past that and began hearing something else. “Something,” Remen writes, “something steadfast right in the middle of our lives that had been there always, even before we were fully human. Our lives

and all other lives depended on it. It was a profound and ineffable encounter with the mysterious.”

“In that moment,” writes Remen “we had glimpsed something beyond our habitual way of seeing and hearing.” Afterward there was a silence and then one of the cardiologists in the room began to talk about his work and to wonder aloud how anyone could be so close to something holy and not know it.

It reminded him, he said, of a prayer that he heard some time back. Somewhat embarrassed, he began to recite it aloud.

“Days pass,” he prayed, “and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightening, illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns, unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder, ‘How filled with awe is this place and we did know it’.”

Lent is filled with such moments, illuminating the darkness and granting new opportunities to reach out for holiness. Through the openings that we allow in our hearts and minds, the God who loves and forgives creates pure hearts and steadfast spirits within us. As our habitual ways of seeing and hearing fall and die like a grain of wheat, God gives us new lives of fruitful service.

After today, we begin our walk toward Passion Sunday and Holy Week. I invite you to take time *this* week to listen to the beating of your heart; physical evidence of the mysterious gift of life given freely in each moment.

Listen into the depths of your being where God touches our minds and souls most intimately. Notice where your current life separates you from God’s love; recognize where you are acting with selfishness or self-disdain, and let God wash away your guilt with forgiveness.

God's love, mercy and life are stronger than the hate, judgment and death that stain God's creation. God *never* causes suffering, never *imposes* suffering on us, and instead brings truth, goodness and beauty from even the darkest, the hardest, the loneliest parts of our lives.

God, the Holy Teacher in the secrecy of our depths, is still inscribing life-giving words of wisdom upon our hearts. Listen and reach for holiness.

---

Works consulted or cited:

- Allen, Ronald J., Dale P. Andrews, and Dawn Ottoni. Wilhelm. *Preaching Gods Transforming Justice*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.
- Bergant, Dianne, Carroll Stuhlmueller, and Robert J. Batastini. *The Psalms: An Inclusive Language Version Based on the Grail Translation from the Hebrew*. Chicago, IL: G.I.A. Publications, 2000.
- Berlin, Adele, and Marc Zvi Brettler. *The Jewish Study Bible: Torah, Neviim, Kethuvim*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Bracke, John M. *Jeremiah 30-52 and Lamentations*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.
- Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of the Prophets*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002.
- Remen, Rachel Naomi. *My Grandfather's Blessings*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2000
- Sánchez, Patricia Datchuck. *The Word We Celebrate*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1989.
- Thompson, John Arthur. *The Book of Jeremiah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.