

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Jeremiah 31:27-34  
October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
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On days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

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.

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My grandfather, John Francis Marion Travis, published the Havre Daily News in Montana for many years. He was dedicated to the value of education and spent hours advocating for students of color at Montana State University. He also gave his time to the preservation of First Nation artifacts at the Museum of the Rockies.

A prolonged pulmonary embolism was the most likely cause of the dementia that haunted his last months, although playing football in his youth with only a leather helmet probably didn't help. Eventually, he stopped recognizing my grandmother, but every night as they lay in bed, he would tell her about the wonderful lady who let him live in her house and his hopes that she would let him stay.

To watch this elegant and generous man lose so many memories was heart-rending. And yet, there was something else – not like a thread, but cord, something stronger and more resilient – that binds him to us still. His love for my grandmother, for his family, lived on even beyond his ability to remember our names and faces.

My Grandpa Jack came to my mind as I read Jeremiah's prophecy. Because this, too, is a story about losing memories and the love that abides; the love that binds eternally.

This passage is among the most recognizable texts for Christians from Hebrew scripture. We are often quick to take this reading as a foreshadowing

of the Christ event, through which God has brought us into covenant. However, there is a depth of understanding, a beautifully inspiring appreciation available to us if we remember to first hear God's promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah's Jewish context.

Jeremiah was a priest from Anathoth. For years, he has been warning the people of the consequences of breaking what are essentially marriage vows with God. They have abandoned God's teachings, God's Torah. Jeremiah kept saying, basically: "God will not save us from our enemies until we save ourselves from our own lesser selves."

And in this morning's passage, God announces through Jeremiah, the intention to resolve the inability of Israel and Judah to keep faith with God. In a relentless move to preserve God's beloved children, the teaching will be written on their inmost being; their minds and wills. God will plant Torah in their hearts.

While the new covenant is in complete continuity with the former covenant, it differs from the former in a few ways: first, this covenant creates an internal transformation in the people themselves that makes obedience far more possible.

And secondly, the new covenant is brought about not by sacrifice, not by an act of repentance or any ritual practice. Instead, *God* takes the initiative: "I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with seed..." "I will watch over them to build and to plant..." "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people."

And then there is one last declaration: "I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sins no more." God chooses to forget their sinfulness, betrayal and infidelity, and erase even the memory of the breach in their relationship.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes some experiences of God as "Eternity entering a moment." And in Jeremiah's prophecy, eternity enters the human heart and does so with deep implications for all humanity and specific implications for Jews and Christians. The foundation of the new covenant is still the relationship that God has been extending to the children of Israel since giving Moses the tablets: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Rabbi Heschel proposes that every event starts out as a change, and the change captured in this new covenant is one of form rather than of content. Heschel defines God's teachings written on the hearts of the people as an act of "received communication" that dissolves the role of the prophet. It

is no longer the prophet who casts a light by which the heart is led into the thinking of the Lord's mind; Torah provides insight from within the people.

Christians need to be careful about how we hear God's new covenant. The promise, for Jeremiah, is intended for those people who lived through the exile in Babylon. To those who experienced God's plucking up and tearing down, the promise is the hope of a refreshed relationship and a clean opportunity to be God's devoted and obedient people.

In its Jewish context, this is a story about identity. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has said that the difference between history and memory is that history is an answer to the question, "What happened?" Memory is an answer to the question, "Who am I?" Diseases or afflictions that erase our memories erode our identity; our sense of who we are.

And that can happen to a clan, a community, a nation as a whole.

Remembering the stories of our tradition's past revitalizes our sense of identity. Recalling the stories of our forebears creates a context for seeing who we are now, and what we have to do to hand on that identity to the future.

Our Christian context, our identity as followers of Christ, requires that we keep in mind that God made a first move toward the exiled people of Judah and Israel, the whole people of Israel, who had to learn to turn toward God in a new way. That means our participation in the newness that God created is forever rooted in Jewish categories and claims.

We are not Jews nor do we replace the Jews; we are grafted on to their arrangement with God. Without the new covenant that Jeremiah celebrates here, the faith of the Hebrews might well have died away and Christianity would never have been born. Instead, we inherit the teachings made flesh in our Jewish brother, Jesus. For our part, we are commanded to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Obedience to God is still exceedingly difficult as long as the covenant is external. People prove just as incapable of fidelity as God is incapable of infidelity. For that reason, God accomplished for our grandmothers and grandfathers what they could not do for themselves.

And he did it by forgetting.

In response to their failure, God refused to remember it. In response to their infidelity, God chose to let the memory fade away. In response to their wrong-doing, God purged all recollection of it.

God forgot.

What God *did not* and *can never* forget is love. As my grandfather's memories were slowly stolen from him, he never forgot what it is to love and to be loved. Even when he could not name it, my grandfather never forgot the best and most essential part of who he was. In that, he share a connection with the God who spoke through Jeremiah to say to the people: "I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore I have prolonged unfailing faithfulness to you."

Rabbi Sacks has said that it is unfair that Jeremiah, the most passionate and tormented of all the prophets, has gone down in history as the prophet of doom. "He was also supremely a prophet of hope," Rabbi Sacks says. "He is the man who said that the people of Israel will be as eternal as the sun, moon and stars. He is the man who, while the Babylonians were laying siege to Jerusalem, bought a field as a public gesture of faith that Jews would return from exile."

Jeremiah's emotions were complex, truly, though not really conflicting. When disaster came with the destruction of the Temple, Jeremiah made one of the most important assertions in Jewish history. He did not see the Babylonian conquest as the defeat of Israel *and* its God. He saw it as the defeat of Israel *by* its God. Ironically, this, for Jeremiah, was also the source of salvaging hope.

God is still here, Jeremiah insisted. If we to return to God, God will return to us. Jeremiah may have lost faith in people; he never lost faith in God. We must keep that memory alive in our collective consciousness.

The prophetic truths of our Israelite ancestors are eternal: Only by being faithful to God do we stay faithful to one another. Only by understanding the deep forces that shape history can we overcome the ravages of history. Only by remembering the stories of those who have gone before us can we realize who *we* are, so that those who come behind us can become who God creates them to be.

It took centuries for the ancient Israelites to learn these truths. Along with our Jewish cousins, we must never forget them or the abiding love of God that gives these teachings life.

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