

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 17, 2024

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 | PSALM 51:1-12 | HEBREWS 5:5-10 | JOHN 12:20-33

If you've been around during Lent, you know we've been looking at covenants in the Hebrew Bible. We began with the post-flood covenant God made with all creation, we moved onto the covenant with Abraham and Sarah's descendants, and then we looked at the Mosaic covenant after the escape from Egypt. We also had a week on snakes in the wilderness which didn't really fit in with the rest of the readings, but we had fun.

Today we come to our final covenant, this one from the book of Jeremiah. And to get what this reading is about, we have to remember the Mosaic covenant that we covered in week three. That covenant, the one given at Sinai, comes with a promise from God to be the Israelites' God. And it comes with a set of instructions or expectations for the people. We call that set of expectations the law or Torah. And basically, it means that the people are to live lives that reflect God's character.¹ Just as God is gracious and generous and merciful, God's people should be gracious and generous and merciful.

So how does it go? Not well. In one ear and out the other. It was, God says, "a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband." The people have ignored the needs of their neighbors and sought profit above all else. They've become increasingly reliant on violence and military power. And their liturgical life has become rote and self-serving. The prophets like Isaiah and Micah and Amos tried to call the people back to their covenant with God, but no one really cared. People had largely forgotten about the covenant God made with them.

Until everything fell apart. Until the Babylonians came in and deported many of the Israelites to a strange place far from home. And it wasn't until the people looked back at their cities lying in ruins that they realized how far they'd fallen short. That's where today's reading from Jeremiah kicks in.

So how does God respond to this broken covenant? What most people thought would happen is that God would just move on. God tried to make a go of it with the Israelites, but things didn't work out. The covenant is no more. We had a relationship with God, but we broke it. It's all over.

Instead, Jeremiah proclaims that God is doing something undeserved and even more unexpected. Even though the people haven't acted like God's people, God will continue to be their God. And so God sets out to make a new covenant, to form a new relationship with the people.

But something needs to change. The people can't just go back to their old ways of doing things. They need to start really living in accordance with God's way of life, with the law or Torah. God really needs to get this message into their heads once and for all.

How could God get this into their heads? Well, maybe God could just write it down bigger. Instead of writing the ten commandments on two stone tablets, you could plaster it on billboards around Jerusalem. Or maybe when the people started acting up, God could write a passive-aggressive email. *I love how creative you are with the covenant I gave you.*

¹ See a description of the Torah outlined in "3/22/15 'Etched in Flesh' by Walter Brueggemann — Pullen Memorial Baptist Church," accessed March 12, 2024, <https://www.pullen.org/sermon-archive-1/32215-etched-in-flesh-by-walter-brueggemann>.

But what does God do? This is the key to the whole reading. “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.” The way that God deals with our failure to love is not by trying to get God’s rules into our heads. It’s by inscribing God’s pattern of life on our hearts.

The image of the heart shows up over a thousand times in scripture. And it’s referring to something more than a biological heart. In Marcus Borg’s book *The Heart of Christianity*, this is how he describes it. “The ‘heart’ is a metaphor for a deep level of the self, a level below our thinking, feeling, and willing, our intellect, emotions or volition.”² In other words, it’s a metaphor for our inner being. What we might call our soul, essence, spirit, or true self. Our heart isn’t just integral to our biological health, but it’s the vital organ of our spiritual health, too.

The problem that the people struggled with before the exile was that they had “closed” hearts or “hardened” hearts. Closed hearts are indifferent to others. They create their own self-serving reality. They are shut off from the gifts of others and the blessings of God. The supreme example of a hardened heart in the Old Testament is pharaoh. Ironically, Jeremiah seems to suggest, the people may have escaped pharaoh’s chariots, but they haven’t escaped his condition.

But by writing this new covenant on our hearts, God embeds the divine way of life into everything we do. God opens us up to live with gratitude to God, generosity toward our neighbors, and humility toward ourselves. God etches God’s pattern of life on our hearts so that our entire lives can reflect God’s mercy and lovingkindness.

Instead of just doing individual acts of mercy, we can live mercifully. Instead of just doing occasional works of love, we can live lovingly. Instead of just doing sporadic deeds of kindness, we can live kindly. There is no part of our lives that isn’t open to God’s presence and call.

So for those of us who have had this new covenant set in our hearts, the question is never *What would Jesus do if he were alive today?* That’s a head question. The question is always *What is the risen Christ doing within and among us?*

We hear one answer to that question whenever we celebrate the Eucharist together. During the words of institution each week, the presiding minister proclaims, “Again, after supper, [Jesus] took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood...”

Going way back to the early church, people came to see the new covenant Jesus alludes to in those words as referring to the covenant that Jeremiah promised. The new covenant, just like Christ’s meal, is given to all, from the least to the greatest, without exclusion or condition. The new covenant offers forgiveness and truth. And that new covenant is given to open our hearts to the needs of the world.

So what is the risen Christ doing within and among us? The same thing Christ does here every week. Feeding. Healing. Forgiving. Restoring. God writes this new covenant on our hearts so that just as the bread and cup we share overflow with Christ’s presence, our entire lives can show forth God’s lovingkindness.

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² Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (Zondervan, 2009), 25.