

The New Covenant
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Jeremiah 31:31-34 John 12:20-33

We are less than two weeks away from Good Friday; less than two weeks away for Jesus' predictions to be complete. Listen for and hear God's word to us, in these words of Jesus'.

John 12: 20-33

Once upon a time, there was a loving Creator, who wanted nothing but the best for his creations. The Creator made them a wonderful paradise for them to live in. It was filled with the most beautiful plants and flowers—the most interesting of birds and animals. The climate was comfortable. The food was plentiful, and there were no bugs. After all, I did say it was paradise. But the people, there was a man and a woman soon grew bored with paradise and began to push the limits of the boundaries that had been established by the Creator. In fact, they outright defied a rule, lied about it and blamed each other. So they Creator sent them away. They had to live outside of paradise forever.

Even though the Creator had been angry because of their failure, they were not abandoned. The Creator continued to maintain contact with them and with their descendents. Each time they failed, the Creator was disappointed. Sometimes there would be severe punishments that included a flood, a famine, and various captivities in foreign lands. But each and every time that the people repented of their sins, the Creator would take them back. And after each and every episode the relationship between the people and the Creator would be restored --until the next time. When the people again began to forget about the Creator, a prophet would be sent to remind them. They would fail to listen and the cycle of sin and consequences would again repeat itself.

In the first lesson this morning, we heard from the prophet Jeremiah. This time, Jeremiah said, that Yahweh—for that was the name they called the Creator—wanted to once again restore their relationship, their covenant. But this time, Yahweh wanted the covenant written, not on paper scrolls or on stone tablets, but written on the hearts of the people. Jeremiah told them that if they wrote the new covenant on their hearts, they couldn't forget it or walk away from it again.

We all know how that worked—don't we? The people said they'd write it on their hearts. They promised that Yahweh would be first in their lives. They promised. Oh yes, they promised. But they turned away from Yahweh and left Jeremiah in a cistern to die.

It's easy, given the 3000 years and 7000 miles distance we have from the situation, to condemn the people. With our modern understanding of the pattern of history often repeating itself, we can think, why didn't they see what they were doing? Why didn't they understand the consequences of their actions? Why wouldn't they listen to Jeremiah? After all they promised...

Less than two weeks from today, we will observe another dark time in the history of the Creator's ongoing attempts to love the people. Yahweh stopped sending prophets to the people because the people killed them. This time, Yahweh decided to send his own Son to the people to prove how much they were loved. The Son's name was Jesus.

Jesus was different from the prophets. He spoke and taught and loved, just like the Creator. Because he was a part of the Creator who was born to be like us. The Creator wanted, through Jesus, to regain the original intimacy with the people. Through Jesus, the Creator was giving the people one-more-chance, but that chance was the best one of all.

Ralph Milton says: "The death of Jesus was the inevitable result of human lust for power, greed, and selfishness, and it is wise to meditate on that, and the ways in which crucifixion happens over and over again." (Rumors, p. 2)

History does repeat itself in oh so many ways. We are just as guilty of breaking our promises, as were the people in both our lessons this morning. We promise to put God first. We promise to put our families first. We promise to put our health and well being first. Even with the best of intentions, we will fail, and others will fail us. We will fail and others will fail because we humans are not capable of perfection. We are a fickle lot, easily led to the easiest way. We don't mean to wander off, but our attention is easily diverted.

Another commentator says: "It happens to all of us, doesn't it? Either we break our promises or we are on the receiving end of broken promises. It happens to children and parents. It happens at work. It happens to married couples, and couples who have been married for 40 or 50 years. It just happens.

"When we experience broken promises, it's almost as if a piece of ourselves, our trust, our integrity is chipped away. The more our trust and integrity are chipped away, the more we replace them with suspicion and mistrust, with disappointment and anger, with frustration and despair. Each broken promise we experience reminds us not only of our own failures, but also of the fact that we humans fail regularly in our attempt to be faithful—faithful to one another, faithful to God." (John R. Bucka, Minister's manual, p.296)

Lent is the time to look at the times we've failed and the times others have failed us. Now is the time to face up to what has happened in our personal lives --and in the life of this faith community-- to face our complicity in those events, to ask for forgiveness and to forgive others

"Andy was a regular member at his church. Always in the same pew every Sunday. Always at every church event.

"But Andy had an argument with another member and stopped coming to church. So the pastor decided to pay him a visit.

“It was a chilly evening. The pastor found Andy at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor’s visit, the man welcomed her, led her to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited.

“The pastor sat down but said nothing. The two of them watched the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone.

“Then she sat back in her chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember’s flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead.

“Not a word was spoken.

“The Pastor glanced at her watch and realized it was time to leave. She slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow, once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As she shook Andy’s hand at the door, she could see the tears in his eyes.

“Andy was back in his regular place in church next week.” (Rumors, p.5)

Have any of you ever been in Andy’s shoes? Or know someone who’s there right now? So upset with what’s happened at church that you just stay home? So upset that you that you cut off your nose to spite your face. So upset that you withdraw yourself from the warm and strength of the body of Christ, only to feel cold and empty all by yourself?

Lent is the time to address those concerns—to make peace with yourself and with God.

“God, in spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness, recommits to Israel. Isn’t that truly amazing? If we were God for a day, would we have continued in our journey to be with Israel? My sense (said the commentator) is that our answer would clearly be no. Long before the prophet Jeremiah, our patience would have run its course. We would have ended that relationship long before this point.” (Bucka, p.297)

Aren’t we glad we’re not God? Because if God had given up on Israel, where would we be today? God continues to want what God has always wanted—US! God wants us to be in relationship with him and with our entire human family. I know that we can’t work on the whole human community right now, so I’m asking you to start here—at home—and at First Church. Can we let go of the hurts and disappointments of the past? Can we try to meet one another with faith and hope and trust in God’s ability to heal all wounds and sorrows? Are we willing to open our hearts to accept and renew a new covenant for the sake of our souls and the soul of our church?

“For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that whoever might believe in Him, shall have eternal life.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.