

March 18th, 2018 Sermon Notes

All readings: http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Lent/BLent5_RCL.html

Sermon Focus: New Covenant, Jeremiah 31:31-34

Jeremiah text *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.*

At the beginning of Lent, I told you about how humans in the Bible treat covenants -- like tissue paper. Adam & Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Judas and Peter all started with good intentions, but the results were less than stellar. To know what Jeremiah is thinking in this passage, we need to talk to historians and seminary professors and dip into second temple Judaism and the portable covenant.

Portable Covenant

The covenant, the promises of God, have always been portable, but the Hebrews in Jeremiah's time had come to believe that the covenant was land based. The Hebrew leaders thought the covenant should be connected to them staying on their promised land. Jeremiah prophesied the opposite view of covenant many times. His message of destruction and foreign exile was (as you can imagine) not received well. Fundamental to Jeremiah's world view was -- wherever-you-go-there-you-are (with God). The people would be blessed while they carried God's promises in their hearts no matter where they landed.

In a sense, this is not a "new" covenant as Jeremiah called it. Jeremiah's new covenant was an iteration of how the Mt. Sinai covenant was supposed to work with a nimble people trusting God to lead them. Also like in the book of Numbers, if the smoke and fire of God moved, the people were supposed to pick up camp and follow. Jeremiah's 'new' covenant was rebranding of the fundamental promise -- God loves us and we follow. What was "new" for Jeremiah was his insight that God's profound patience and faithfulness was his people even in very dark times, even if they lost their homeland. This was very different from the culture around Jeremiah where God is just a jealous real estate agent.

First / Second Temple Judaism

To know why Jeremiah was so poorly received throughout the Book of Jeremiah, you need a little something on Temples. **The first temple** -- This was the beginning of the end of the portable-covenant-days. Solomon, the wise, built the Temple on the backs of slaves and taxation. He proved to be so *unwise* that the kingdom splitting in two was his real legacy. The first temple was built mid-10th century BCE (3000 years-ish ago) and its destruction began on July 29, 587 -- 2605 years ago (Babylonians were great record keepers). After a series of more unfortunate events, all the influential and elite Hebrews went into Babylonian exile and God's promise to love God's people would have to be portable if it was to have any substance.

Jeremiah lived through the gathering storms of war. Because he had insight into the reality of the world around him, he became a "bloom where you are planted" kind of guy. He was adamant that God would be with them wherever and that they should build houses and settle in after the catastrophe of losing the land *BUT hear me clearly, Jeremiah did not give up on the God/land/people connection, he just took the look view, a view toward the **new covenant** that was outside his timeframe and maybe even outside his rational understanding.*

The Second Temple would be built by a new generation when the Persians defeated the Babylonians. The Persians had a different management style. The Persians sent the Hebrew elites back to Israel. Persian leaders thought that cultural rootedness might make their subjugated people groups happier with their lot. The second temple was rededicated in 516 BCE, improved by Herod in Jesus' time and would be destroyed again ~500 years later by the Romans after Jesus in 70 CE. Today if you go on pilgrimage to Israel to pray at the wailing wall, you are praying at the ruins of the second (Herod expanded) temple. (The Ezra / Nehemiah period tells the story of rebuilding the second temple)

And Jesus

At communion every Sunday you hear, "Drink this all of you, this is my blood of the new covenant." At the last supper, Jesus is reminding the disciples that the promise / the covenant is portable. Not even his impending death would take away his promise of love to the end of the age and beyond. This promise will be fulfilled only when the whole creation, from the least to the greatest, knows the love of God. That unfolding promise cannot be shaken by people no matter how terrible or off course they get. This is the heart of the new covenant -- God shows up, and shows up, and shows up in love, and we are blessed when believe this and act accordingly.