

Into this calamitous state, stepped the prophets tasked by God to speak God’s Word to God’s people. Sometimes that Word was good news of great joy; but sometimes that Word was bad news promising great danger. During this tumultuous period the prophets spoke words of disaster to God’s people Israel: Amos and Isaiah, Hosea and Micah warned that Israel’s faithlessness and sinfulness would be her downfall, and urged the people to repent and return to God. Sadly, Israel’s kings failed to keep God’s law and Israel’s people fell further from God’s ways; the Assyrians and Babylonians are seen as God’s agents, defeating Israel and forcing her people into exile as part of God’s judgment on Israel.

Jeremiah’s prophecy comes to Israel as Assyria is in decline and Babylon is on the rise. Babylon’s king, the ruthless Nebuchadnezzar, imposed harsh penalties on the people, and when they rebelled, he brought near-complete ruin to Israel. Of all this Jeremiah was a witness, and many of the more tragic and disastrous events of the period are the subject of specific prophecies from him. But Jeremiah’s prophecy is notable because it contains a word of hope that looks beyond the defeat and national humiliation to eventual renewal and restoration.<sup>1</sup>

This message of hope set against the background of religious disillusionment, political disaster, and immense human suffering gives Jeremiah’s words their essential character. From the perspective of the readers, these religious, political and military disasters were now events of the past. Nothing could be done to turn back the clock or to prevent from happening what had so painfully and tragically occurred. Instead, Jeremiah’s words are spoken with a mind to help God’s people to face these tragedies, to respond courageously to them, and to look beyond them with hope. Although many of the prophecies necessarily look back upon events belonging to an irreversible past, they did so in a manner designed to promote a deep and certain hope in the future and in the eventual restoration of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Which brings us to our text from Jeremiah. In the face of insurmountable loss, Israel might be excused for not seeing the word of hope. With Jerusalem in ruins, her Temple gone and her kings vanquished, Israel doubted that God would fulfill the promises to David of an eternal kingdom. With her land overrun, Israel doubted God’s ability to keep God’s promises to Abraham of a great nation, land, and blessing. It’s a very human reaction. When faced with unforeseen disasters and circumstances out of our control, we wonder what God is doing and how God could allow such things to happen. Like Israel, we challenge God’s motives and question God’s competence, and we overlook the word of hope that God offers us.

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<sup>1</sup> R. E. Clements. *Jeremiah. Interpretation: A Bible-Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press: Atlanta. 1988. 2.

So it is to this disheartened people that God speaks a word of hope. *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.* With the words “the days are surely coming,” God promises that God will act soon. The exile of Israel in Babylon lasted approximately 70 years, and during that time God did not abandon Israel. God knew what God’s people suffered. What’s more, God had a plan! God would make a “new covenant” with God’s people: not just with the kings and the nobles, not just with the northern or the southern kingdom, not just with Israel or Judah, but a covenant with all God’s people.

This covenant would be something entirely new and different. *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.* The covenant God made with the people at Sinai gave Israel the Law, which God intended would mold this group of ex-slaves into a people worthy of a great God; but that covenant came with conditions. If Israel obeyed God’s Law, then she would be blessed; if Israel transgressed God’s Law, then she would be punished. Israel’s current predicament was the punishment for her disobedience. With this new covenant, God promised something better.

*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.* God intends a new covenant for Israel with a new kind of law. Israel’s current exile would be a second wilderness experience for God’s people: a time for them to learn – again – that they cannot save themselves and must rely on God. This new covenant would place on the heart of each believer God’s promise of forgiveness: it would not be conditional upon the law or upon the people’s behavior, but God would do this for the people out of God’s great love for Israel. God renews the pledge, made to the people at Sinai, to be Israel’s God; what’s more, God claims - again - this wayward people Israel as God’s own.

*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 (31:31-34).* The time of punishment and exile will end. God will forgive the people for their “iniquity.” God’s unmerited grace requires no specific act by the people. God forgives because God can and will forgive the people. God forgives because God desires this people to be God’s own. This new covenant of grace implies a new relationship between God and God’s people, a relationship based on love and not the law, a relationship

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

based on divine compassion and not harsh justice, a relationship based on genuine closeness with God and not an irrational fear of the Lord.

Israel will now be constituted as the people of God in a new way. God will give them a new heart so that they will know the Lord with a deep, intimate love that exceeds the works of the law. The law remains a key point of continuity between the old covenants and the new covenant; but now the law will be written upon the heart by God's act of forgiveness. Israel's past becomes truly the past: God will no longer remember their sins. All is forgiven – completely and forevermore – and everyone will have the chance to know the Lord.

To hear these words of hope in which the people know they will still be God's people with a new relationship and a clean slate and a future must have been an extraordinary relief. The people know that God will redeem them and build them up again; and yet, it would be some time before God made good on the promised new covenant. Israel's exile did end, and many of the people returned to Jerusalem; but it would be hundreds of years before the new covenant occurred. Following Malachi's prophecies there would be 400 years of silence, with no word from God. Then God chose to speak in a dramatic way: through the birth of the Son. In Jesus Christ, God came to dwell with God's people, to teach them the new law of love that would be the basis for a new covenant. God in Christ came to reestablish contact with God's people, to fulfill the covenants of identity, land, blessing, and an eternal kingdom. Israel's God, the God of Creation, the Lord of Hosts, did this because God who promises is faithful. God who loves is always near. God who lives is always for God's people.

Prayer: O God of our Hearts, You yearn to be so close to us that we can know you in every breath, in every hope, in every relationship. Meet us here today and teach us to recognize the covenant of justice, peace and love you have written on our hearts. So may our desires become your desires, our work become your work, and our community the place where you are sought and found. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen

# The Promise of a New Covenant

Sunday, October 16, 2016

*Jeremiah 31:31, 31-34*

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

This week we depart slightly from our survey of the Biblical Covenants, for in our text today God does not make a covenant with God's people, but rather God promises them a new covenant in the future. Jeremiah speaks this word of hope and encouragement to God's people Israel when their life and nation and faith are being sorely tested by outside forces.

When King David died, his son, Solomon, succeeded him. God chose Solomon as the one to build a great Temple for God in Jerusalem. Solomon's men labored for many years to build this magnificent Temple for God; all the written records say that this Temple demonstrated the glory of God and the strength of Israel. This Temple became the center of religious life for Israel. In order to build this splendid Temple, Solomon employed thousands of workers and gathered tons of materials and precious metals from all over the known world; and to pay for all this, Solomon imposed heavy taxes on the people.

Taxes are a funny things: so easy to impose, so hard to relinquish. With the Temple finished, Solomon continued to extract high taxes from the people to pay for his government, his armies, and his wives (300 according to the Bible!). When Solomon died, the people hoped his son, Rehoboam, would repeal the taxes and lighten the load on the people, but Rehoboam continued to tax the people and so they rebelled (c. 930 BC). Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel broke away and formed their own kingdom to the north, called the Kingdom of Israel or the Kingdom of Samaria. Rehoboam's brother, Jeroboam, ruled the northern kingdom from his capital at Shechem. The remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, stayed loyal to Rehoboam who ruled from Jerusalem.

This divided kingdom survived for a few hundred years, but neither kingdom could withstand the pressure of new empires rising in the east. First came the Assyrians, threatening the northern kingdom, which ultimately fell to invasion in 722 BC. Then came the Babylonians who defeated the Assyrians and seized their empire: the kingdom of Judah found itself caught between the Babylonian armies to the north and the Egyptian armies to the south (Pharaoh aligned himself with Assyria's king). The Babylonians decisively conquered Judah in 587 BC with the sack of Jerusalem, the destruction of the king's palace and the razing of God's Temple. This last defeat destroyed the very fiber of Israel: without king or Temple, the people lost hope and faith. Israel never recovered her unity or national identity.