

“Journeying with Jeremiah, Part 9: The Promise”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for October 16th 2016 (22nd Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Jeremiah 31: 27-34

There are not too many Old Testament texts...not too many texts drawn from the Law, the Prophets or the Wisdom writings of the Hebrew Bible...not too many Old Testament texts of which it might truly be said: here is a text that is better known and more deeply cherished in Christian circles, than in Jewish circles! And yet, if such a claim can be justified concerning **any** text drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures, it is arguably this morning's—with its promise of a coming new covenant between God, and God's people.

That statement is true, I think, despite the fact that you will not find—if you consult the New Testament—tons and tons of **explicit** references to this passage. Where you **will** find it extensively quoted is in the eighth chapter of the book Hebrews, in which Jeremiah's promise of new covenant is extensively referenced, in a section of Hebrews which speaks of Jesus Christ as the High Priest of a new covenant. I would argue, however, that the explicit reference to Jeremiah in Hebrews, provides clear cut evidence of the way in which the whole concept of new covenant shapes and informs many other New Testament passages. The bottom line is this: whereas normative Judaism continues to be grounded in loyalty to the covenant with Moses—the Sinai covenant—the Church, convinced that God had made a new beginning with the coming of Jesus, was galvanized by Jeremiah's promise of new covenant.

But what precisely is this promised new covenant? What precisely does it entail? In particular: what does it mean when Jeremiah speaks—more precisely when the God of Jeremiah speaks—of a covenant written on the hearts of God's people? Permit me, over the next 15 minutes or so, to try to answer that question by unpacking two of the crucial themes that are part and parcel of Jeremiah's promise...Jeremiah's promise of new covenant.

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The first of those themes involves the highly **personal** nature of the covenant of which Jeremiah speaks. And it likely goes without saying—although I had best say it: when Jeremiah speaks of a covenant written on the hearts of God's people, it is only natural that our first instinct as Christians is to see this as the promise of a day when the covenant written on the stone tablets given to Moses will be replaced by something else. That's true. That's all well and good. And that is certainly the understanding that informs such Biblical books as Hebrews and 2nd Corinthians. But if we push further...if we ponder more deeply...surely we will recognize the deeply personal nature of this new

covenant. Indeed: were it not for the fact that we nowadays tend to regard “individualism” as deeply problematic, I would go so far as to speak of the deeply “individualistic” nature of Jeremiah’s promised covenant. But whether one uses the “I” word (individual) or the more apt “P” word (personal), it’s hard to deny some such dimension to a covenant written on the very hearts of God’s people: especially when you consider that the heart, within the anthropology of the Hebrew worldview, signifies not merely an organ that pumps blood, but the place at which the very core identity of the human person is to be located.

And I am reminded, this morning, of a lecture series we hosted at Knox Church in Parksville during the spring of 2011. That series was devoted to what has come to be known as the “axial age”, an age that is said to have transformed parts of Asia, Europe and Northern Africa during a time-span said to have begun some 800 years prior to the birth of Christ and lasting for roughly 600 years. The theory comes to us from the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, who argued that key developments during those tumultuous six centuries--developments in China, India, Persia, Greece and ancient Israel—continue to shape human culture. Having devoted lectures to poets and philosophers from China, India and Greece, I then I invited my good friend Ed Searcy to come to Parksville, and give a lecture on Jeremiah...although for my purposes that day, it could as readily have been a lecture on Ezekiel who also serves as a good representative of the spirit of the Axial Age within the Jewish tradition. And the reason...the reason Jeremiah and Ezekiel play such a crucial role, is that they manifest in **their** context, the same emphasis that bursts into view in other parts of Asia and Europe: an emphasis upon the importance of the person, the ineradicable dignity and matchless responsibility each human being, each person—and yes, to risk using that loaded word—each of us individually bear within ourselves.

And it’s not just Jeremiah’s talk of a covenant written on the human heart that helps to make that crystal clear. Earlier—at this start to this morning’s text—Jeremiah (echoing a theme that is developed even more fully in Ezekiel) insists that *no longer* shall it be said by God’s people “*The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge*” *but everyone shall die for their own iniquity. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.* I know that sounds grim, but it’s actually an amazing breakthrough! Without denying our corporate connections...without denying that we do play a key role in shaping and moulding one another’s lives...what Jeremiah here insists upon....

...and what we see perfectly manifested in Jesus...

...is the good and glorious but also sobering news, that when God beholds humanity, when God addresses humanity, when God interacts with humanity, God does not enter into any of those negotiations as if encountering an amorphous blob, as if addressing a faceless herd! No: God sees the person...God knows the heart...and God is involved in deeply intimate ways—person-to-person ways, I and Thou ways—with each and every one of us. Whatever else Jeremiah’s new covenant means, surely it means a new

understanding of personal relationship...and yes personal accountability...as we stand before our Maker.

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The other...the other aspect of Jeremiah's promised new covenant I want to ponder, this morning, involves its closing promise, the promise of forgiveness: a promise that seems to emerge almost out-of-the-blue, at the tail end of our text. *"And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD."* Up to that point what we are hearing is a reiteration of the new emphasis on the personal nature of this covenant, with each one knowing God for him- or herself. But then—like I say, almost out of the blue—Jeremiah hears God add one further promise: *For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.* I will forgive their iniquity! I will remember their sin no more.

In some ways...in some ways...we may find odd this juxtaposition: this placing side by side, on the one hand, of a promise of a new, renewed accountability—personal accountability before God—with, on the other hand, the promise not only of forgiveness but in a very real sense, the promise of divine forgetfulness: not only forgiving sin, but God going so far as to offer the assurance: *"I will remember their sin no more."* Even the most merciful among us will often say: "Oh yes, I forgive...but I will never forget!" But that is precisely what Jeremiah's God promises to accomplish...the same God who has promised to hold us to the highest standard of personal accountability, personal integrity, personal probity. Can those two things really and truly be held together?

As I wrestled with that very big question over the past week, I kept hearing a powerful echo, courtesy of the American Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas. In one of his earliest books, Hauerwas spoke of the essential role forgiveness plays in the ethic of Jesus. Making the point that Jesus calls us to an almost super-human perfection...

...recall those chilling words from the Sermon on the Mount! *Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect!...*

...reminding us that the way of Jesus is a demanding way, at times a terrifyingly scrupulous way, Hauerwas goes on to insist that it is only the promise of God's mercy...God's forgiveness...that provides a basis upon which we would even dare to begin to step out along so demanding a spiritual path.

And you know: forgiveness itself is tough, demanding spiritual work. Don't let anyone tell you that forgiveness is some kind of cheap grace: because if it's cheap, it's not real forgiveness. It's costly to ask to be forgiven, which is to say: it's costly to reach that point where you can bring yourself to look in the mirror and know that **you** are the one—not someone else, not circumstances, not dumb luck but you yourself are the one—who bears responsibility for harm; it's tough to

see that clearly, tough to then go out and try to put things right with those you have harmed. And, of course, it's also costly to be on the other end of that process: to forgive someone who has seriously harmed you or someone you love. Offering that kind of forgiveness is hard slogging, tough demanding spiritual work: so tough and demanding that I personally regard it as work that though it often begins on earth, requires heaven's eternity for its completion. I believe that heaven is a place where forgiveness and reconciliation continue... continue in ways we cannot even begin to imagine. Because the work of mercy is costly work! The work of forgiveness is work that exacts a heavy price. There is no need for us to apologize...no need for us to say "aw shucks and aren't we silly" for regarding forgiveness in all of its complexity, as a central part—in many ways the defining part—of the Gospel to which we cling, the very life-raft...the very life-raft God has offered us in this new and promised covenant...which is to say the very life-raft God has offered us in and through Jesus Christ.

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I have reached my end...and yes, we have reached **our** end—at least for now—of this journey with Jeremiah, although hopefully not the end of our journey with the **God** of Jeremiah. And yes: just as there is no need for us to apologize for the role mercy plays in the Christian dispensation, there is no need for us to apologize for the fact that for us, as Christians, all roads lead—and all journeys head—to Jesus Christ, and him crucified. While it would be presumptuous for us to imagine that there is only one way in which to read the book we call the Old Testament...

...it's a book that you'd be bound to learn in a very different way inside of a synagogue and it's a book you'll likely learn in yet other ways inside a university classroom...

...there is no need for Christian disciples to pretend that **we** do not hear—within, say, the prophetic cadences of a Jeremiah, the poetry of the Psalms, or the narrative magic of a book such as Jonah—there is no need for us to pretend that we do not hear within these hallowed pages, echoes of and yes, pointers to the One who has called to us from that much beloved lakeside in ancient Galilee. The One who has called us to lives of deeply **personal** engagement with God and neighbour! The One who has assured us that there is bread for the journey...and a **new beginning** for those who stumble along the way! The One who was prepared to stake his very life on God's grace: the grace of the new covenant, the new beginning, of which Jeremiah was permitted an early sighting. And so my prayer this morning is simply this!

May the unyielding promise and astounding freedom of that new covenant come to life in our midst this very day! In our hearts! In our minds! In our lives! May it bear rich fruit here and now: in the strong and faithful name of Jesus Christ!

Thanks be to God!