

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**The Fifth Sunday in Lent – Sunday, March 21, 2021**  
**John 12:20-33**

*“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... 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.” Amen. May it be so!*

Our first lesson this morning is from the prophet Jeremiah. More is known about Jeremiah than most of the other prophets in our canon of scripture. Jeremiah lived during the most crucial period of Judah’s existence as a kingdom. He saw the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon’s Temple after he had relentlessly warned his people to mend their ways before it was too late. After this catastrophe, tradition holds that he wrote the Book of Lamentations in which he bitterly lamented Israel’s terrible fate, and some scholars refer to him as “the weeping prophet”.

Jeremiah was born of a priestly family of the tribe of Benjamin and his call to prophetic ministry came when he was young. In the year 626 BCE, God called to Jeremiah saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” To which, Jeremiah responded, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” God then touched his mouth and then said, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.” (1:5-9)

God called Jeremiah to prophesy of Jerusalem’s coming destruction that would occur from invaders from the north. This would happen because Israel had been unfaithful to the laws of the covenant and had forsaken the Lord by worshiping the Canaanite fertility god Baal. Because Israel had strayed so far from God, they had broken the covenant, resulting in God’s withdrawal of his blessings. Jeremiah prophesied that the nation of Judah would be faced with famine, plundered, and taken captive by foreigners who would exile them to a foreign land. Which, of course, is precisely what happened.

Now as you can imagine, warnings and prophecies such as these did not make Jeremiah a popular man and he was persecuted by those who had the most to lose. He was despised, beaten, and imprisoned, and numerous plots were made against his life. Finally, after Jeremiah prophesied that Jerusalem would be handed over to the Babylonian army, the king’s officials put him down a cistern, where he sank deep into the mud. It would seem that the intention was to let him die of starvation, but he was later rescued by a foreigner, although he remained imprisoned until the city did, in fact, fall to the Babylonians. Being a prophet of God is a rough business indeed – and being correct only makes things worse!

While Jeremiah lamented Israel’s fate, he also proclaimed God’s everlasting love and coming redemption of his chosen people, that, from the faithful remnant of this destroyed kingdom, God’s love will nurture and grow a great nation. From the wasteland of emptiness and death, the Lord God of creation will bring forth new, surprising, and vibrant life. Through Jeremiah, God reminds his exiled children of his pledge of love and joyful renewal of life, saying:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

Again I will build you, and you shall be built,  
O virgin Israel!  
Again you shall take your tambourines,  
and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers. (31:3-4)

Later in this very same chapter, comes our lesson this morning from Jeremiah. In it, Jeremiah prophesies a new covenant: “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.” (v31:31). Moreover, he explains that this new covenant will not be like the previous one, made with the people in the days of their Egyptian slavery and written on stone tablets – too easily forgotten and disobeyed. Instead, God promises that in the future: “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... for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.” (v.33b; 34b) What an Easter promise to hear in the midst of this long, dry Lenten year we have had!

Now, this new covenant isn't new in that God's divine law is different. The 'newness' of the covenant seems primarily to be how it will be received and made active. According to one commentator, the old covenant was in need of revitalization because of its overly high estimation of human creatures to comply and obey the law it embraced. That, prone to errors of judgment as well as temperament, humans simply seem predisposed to break it, even when it is in their best interests to keep it.<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah seems to acknowledge this when he describes God's disappointment in the face of “a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband.” (v. 32) This new covenant that God promises will be entirely different from the old, in that God's divine law – the law of love – will be engraved on the human heart. God promises to pour out His grace upon the people to grant them help from within to keep the covenant faithfully.

Jeremiah seems to realize that humanity simply does not have the capacity to heal itself. Rather, humanity is healed by re-membering our relationship of belonging – when we remember that God is ours and we are God's. The founding principle of this new covenant is “I will be their God and they shall be my people”. And this relationship of belonging will be renewed when God writes the divine law on our hearts. The new will for humanity will be the result of something **God does** – God will write the capacity for keeping the covenant on the inward hearts of the people. Hope for such transformed wills will lie within God's grace, not in any hope for human perfection. **God initiates – and we receive and respond.** This is the nature of covenant. And I'll tell you, after this past year of painful examples of the failures of humanity, I say thanks be to God for this!

Jeremiah's prophecy to the people of Judah offers us as well (and especially in this time) a powerful vision of the **faithful life**. Invited to receive the law of love into our hearts, we will know God in a new way, as the one who seeks constantly to reconcile with us and the one who speaks directly to the heart. This grace-filled life is given to us and lived out by us in response to God's initiative in renewing our relationship of belonging.

What might it be like to have God's law – the law of love – engraved on our hearts? How might we be different if we truly knew ourselves to belong to God and for God to belong to us? Perhaps we would not find ourselves so easily engaged in the all-too ordinary and yet so destructive petty struggles for power and esteem. If the law of love were written on our hearts, perhaps we would find ourselves filled with enough of a sense of self and goodwill toward others

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, Samuel K.; *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*; Westminster John Knox Press (2008), p.126

that we wouldn't so fearfully fight to steal it from another, but could instead give love to the other from the overabundance of our hearts? Imagine what such a living might be like.

Imagine, too, how this pandemic may have unfolded differently if we received God's law upon our hearts. Perhaps our fearful grasping at the delusions of personal freedom would have fallen away and instead we remembered and embodied God's imperative to love our neighbor and protect the most vulnerable. How might that have changed the course of the past year? I think in these weird pandemic times, living out God's law of love – love of God and our neighbor – looks like wearing masks to protect others, maintaining social distancing, and getting vaccinated when it is available and medically appropriate for us to do so.

And now is certainly not the time to relent in our practices of community responsibility. This week has seen the beginning of an increase in community transmission of the Coronavirus after weeks of decline. God's law of love demands that we recognize that our desires for self-determination and liberty must not infringe upon or endanger others. Rarely have we lived through a time wherein our individual actions are so explicitly and quantitatively tied to community well-being. We can literally measure our love of neighbor in daily case counts. To have God's divine law engraved on our hearts means to know and respond in our lives with the understanding of our responsibility for each other. God's love demands reciprocity – not only love returned to God but also given to those whom God loves, which is all of humanity. This law of love is truly a grace-filled gift but is also a demanding and sometimes costly one.

But fear not! To have God's divine law engraved on our hearts is also to experience salvation – to draw deeply from the waters of eternal life. Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant is a powerful herald of the Good News that will be preached and embodied in Jesus. Looking forward to Holy Week which begins next Sunday, let us begin to contemplate how God makes room within our hearts for the grace of much-needed resurrection.

Amen.