

Things Are Going to Change  
By the Rev. Michael Blackwood  
United Church of Broomfield  
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Jeremiah 31:27-34 (NRSV)

27 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. 28 And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. 29 In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." 30 But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. 31 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. 32 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. 33 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. 34 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.

Psalms 119: 97-104 (NRSV)

Oh, how I love your law!  
It is my meditation all day long.  
98 Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,  
for it is always with me.  
99 I have more understanding than all my teachers,  
for your decrees are my meditation.  
100 I understand more than the aged,  
for I keep your precepts.  
101 I hold back my feet from every evil way,  
in order to keep your word.  
102 I do not turn away from your ordinances,  
for you have taught me.  
103 How sweet are your words to my taste,  
sweeter than honey to my mouth!  
104 Through your precepts I get understanding;  
Therefore, I hate every false way.

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So last week we heard Jeremiah prophesy to the Israelites that God was angry with them. God was angry because...

- after being brought of slavery in Egypt, God gave the Israelites the ten commandments - a covenant of rules that would govern their lives and lead to their well-being...
  - “You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to me. So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me. You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation.” – God (Ex. 19:4-6)
  - ““Everything that the Lord has said we will do.” – The Israelites (Ex. 19:8)
- After receiving this covenant and agreeing to it, they proceeded to disobey and dishonor the covenant. Just as we are, they were sinners. But the laws of the Torah were given to help them through sin, to learn and to repent. They began to worship other Gods. They didn’t even try to repent.

So, we can understand that God was angry. It gives reason as to why God chose to punish them and send them into exile into Babylon.

As we heard last week, when God exiled them, it included instructions and hope. While in Babylon, make a home for yourselves, your children and your grandchildren. “...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (29:7).

That brings us to today’s scripture reading. While God was angry with the Israelites (and rightfully so), God never stopped loving them. In the book of Jeremiah, chapters 30-33 are referred to as “the book of comfort.” Our reading today is from Jeremiah’s book of comfort. Despite Jeremiah’s prophecies of punishment by God, Jeremiah also prophesied about God’s love and hope.

What do we hear from today’s reading?

The promise of a new covenant – some may say a “RENEWED” covenant.

- In verse 27 and 37 we hear, “The days are surely coming.” It’s the promise from God, yet again. The guarantee that God will sow the house of Israel and Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals.

God will re-unify Israel and Judah, which they have torn apart. You are better together as I intended and that is how you will be. It is a reiteration of what we heard last week when they were being sent to Babylon; even in another land you will be better off when your neighbors are better off. Their success is yours. We are better together.

God promises to sow the seeds of humans and animals. God will ensure that both they and their animals will procreate abundantly and flourish.

- God says, just as I have plucked up, broken down, overthrown, destroyed and brought evil – I will watch over you to build up, to achieve, to raise up and bring goodness. God is reminding them, “don’t forget that my rewards are equal to, if not greater than, my punishments.”

For all of our advancements, it’s interesting how we as a species struggle to learn and change. When times are tough, we easily fall into a state of hopelessness where we like to linger. While there, we don’t appreciate it or try to understand ourselves or the WHYS and HOWS of how we got there to begin with. We sulk. We pout. When things are hard, all we can think about is how to get out of that state, how to make things better **as soon as possible**. It’s human nature. When things are difficult, we reminisce on how good things used to be, but forget that we overcame before, so we will overcome again.

- Jeremiah continues: In those days – the days that are surely coming – it won’t be as it used to be where “the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

This proverb or saying can be found in Ezekiel 18:2-3 also and originates from Exodus 20:5. It had become a popular sentiment of the people, one that expressed how they felt about their relationship with God as that time. The Israelites “found in it an explanation of their sufferings which relieved their consciences. They were suffering, they said, for the sins of their fathers, not for their own.”<sup>1</sup> The reality is however, that the Israelites were misunderstanding and misapplying the proverb which was actually a warning to refrain from evil, lest they transmit that evil to future generations. In other words, it had always meant that one should and would be morally responsible for themselves.

Instead of hearing, “be good and do good as an example to those who come after you,” they heard and focused on, “you’ll be punished for your parent’s sins.”

So, in verse 30 God reiterates, “There will come a day of blessing where there will be no sin for which a subsequent generation must bear the cost”<sup>2</sup> - **you** get punished for **your** own sins.

Then in verse 31, God says, THINGS ARE GOING TO CHANGE. Things won’t be like they were before when I brought your ancestors out of slavery in Egypt. Instead of the law on tablets, an external law for you to engage, “I will put my law **within you**, and I will **write it on your hearts....**

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<sup>1</sup> Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers

<sup>2</sup> Connections, Year C, Volume 3, page 392.

God changed the law from something that was between God and God's people, to something that was within each individual.

Verse 34 indicates that, "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,'" for they shall all know me. God makes a change going forward, from the least of us to the greatest, promising to forgive our transgressions - to forget our sins.

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For the people of Judah, the new reality that Jeremiah envisioned was to begin with a life-altering encounter with the living God. On that day, the relationship between God's people and God would move beyond formal religion and mere attempts at obedience. For too long, the Judahites had equated their life with God to the performance of ritual and the keeping of commands. At worst, this way of relating to God allowed them to separate religion from their personal ethics. But Jeremiah asserted that when the new day dawned, God would internalize the law by inscribing it on the innermost places of each person.

Instead of struggling endlessly and slavishly for faithfulness, God's people would be unleashed to live lives of faithful obedience through the transformation of encountering the living God in a bold new way. The desire to live for God would bubble forth from inside of God's people. It would permeate into all areas of life so that they would truly live as the people of God for the world.

Jeremiah prophesied a new age of personal relationship with God. The prophet foresaw a day when each of God's people would truly know the Lord — we would no longer need to be taught ABOUT God or hear ABOUT God, because the days would surely come when we would have a moment-by-moment relationship with God...from within.

God's desire for relationship is genuine and echoes from the earliest pages of the scriptures when God conversed with the first humans and walked with them in the garden. A people who truly know the Lord are a people ready to act. Knowing God is the doorway to living as the people God created us to be — a people who exist to embody and reflect God's character to a watching world. By knowing the Lord, we become clues to those looking for God and voices of hope to all.

Jeremiah's prophesy with this new covenant was for a renewed people of God as a whole, with "the house of Israel and the house of Judah." We are often tempted to understand our relationship with God in only individualistic terms. A solely individual approach to faith, an attitude of, "I don't need a church or other people to experience God," remains a temptation for people, but such a view is foreign to the biblical faith, and certainly foreign to the new reality described by the prophet. Jeremiah could see clearly a new community of God's people drawn "from the least of them to the greatest."

E. Stanley Jones, a 20th-century Methodist missionary to India, said, “Christianity that doesn’t **begin** with the individual doesn’t begin; Christianity that ends with the individual ends.” God’s people exist as a missional community for the world. The danger of a solely self-referential faith is that it exists for the individual rather than for the world. Just as God freed Israel from Egypt to function as a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” for the sake of all nations, so also in the new covenant, God’s people corporately function as a missionary people.

We are the inheritors of that mission. As the apostle Peter, writing to the Christian community, put it: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

All of Jeremiah’s preaching reaches its climax in God’s declaration of intention to forgive iniquity and remove the sin of the Israelites from God’s memory. These words were soothing to the ears of those who were aware of their past and present sins back then, and they are comforting to our ears today. God intended to create a new future built on new memories by freeing God’s people from slavery to their past failings. As biblical scholar Carolyn Osiek writes, “It is not ‘forgive and forget’ as if nothing wrong had ever happened, but ‘forgive and go forward,’ building on the mistakes of the past and the energy generated by reconciliation to create a new future.”<sup>3</sup> The power of Jeremiah’s words for us is found in the promise of God to forgive us and reconcile us to God as the basis for experiencing the other promises. This is good news indeed.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, as he dined with his disciples he said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

Jeremiah offered the words God had given him as a poetic glimpse of the future that God has for those who seek God. In the midst of their punishment and their feelings of hopelessness, God re-directed their sights and promised a new covenant. God gave us Jesus, the embodied promise of that hope. The early Christian leader Tertullian wrote, “Hope is patience with the lamp lit.”<sup>4</sup> This is a hope that can truly change the world. Today, following Jesus Christ is our way to experience the message of hope that Jeremiah preached to those desperate and longing for God.

AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.forgivenessweb.com/RdgRm/Quotationpage.html](http://www.forgivenessweb.com/RdgRm/Quotationpage.html)

<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Positive Quotations* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed; Compiled by John Cook (Fairview Press, 1997), 375.