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A Time is Coming
United Church of Broomfield
March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (CEB)

³¹The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. ³²It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me even though I was their husband, declares the Lord. ³³No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "Know the Lord!" because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

Psalms 51:1-12 (CEB)

51 Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

²Wash me completely clean of my guilt;
purify me from my sin!

³Because I know my wrongdoings,
my sin is always right in front of me.

⁴I've sinned against you—you alone.
I've committed evil in your sight.

That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,
completely correct when you issue your judgment.

⁵Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,
from the moment my mother conceived me.

⁶And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;
you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.^[a]

⁷Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;
wash me and I will be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and celebration again;
let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.

⁹Hide your face from my sins;
wipe away all my guilty deeds!

¹⁰Create a clean heart for me, God;
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!

¹¹Please don't throw me out of your presence;
please don't take your holy spirit away from me.

¹²Return the joy of your salvation to me
and sustain me with a willing spirit.

This morning's **good news** comes to us from a beautiful passage of scripture in the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. If you know your Bible just a little bit, you may be surprised to hear that there is "a beautiful passage" in Jeremiah. What I like most about Jeremiah is his raw and real relationship with God where he complained, lamented and interrogated God and didn't think twice about whether he should or could do such a thing! Jeremiah was Israel's weeping prophet. His message was so heavy that he has left a word in our vocabulary: *jeremiad*. The dictionary says that a "jeremiad" is a lamentation, or a mournful complaint. Well, that's the sort of thing that gets its name from this long-ago prophet, a man who said he wished his eyes were a fountain of tears so he could really express how miserable he was feeling. If you know any of these facts about Jeremiah, you will wonder why I refer to his beautiful words.

But in truth, the scripture lesson of the day is one of the loveliest units to be found anywhere -- not only anywhere in the Bible, but in all of human literature. "The days are surely coming," Jeremiah announces on God's behalf, "when God will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." Now Israel and Judah knew what it was to have a covenant with God; their ancestors had enjoyed such a remarkable relationship with God when they were delivered from the slavery of Egypt.

That covenant was so extraordinary that it was sealed in drama and splendor at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Ten Commandments. Some of us have seen the way Hollywood portrayed this event in the grand days of Cecil B. DeMille, but although they pulled out all the stops in trying to tell the story, the job was out of the league of any filmmaker, regardless of their skills.

But as wonderful as that event was, it failed because Israel broke the covenant. So, Jeremiah, a man who seemed sometimes to thrive on disaster, said that a better day was coming, a day so much better that it was difficult to explain. The prophet put it this way: When God gave Moses the Law at Sinai, it was engraved on stone, which was really rather impressive and certainly symbolic. But in the great day that was coming, law books would be unnecessary and commandments of stone obsolete. Why? Because in the new day, God would write the law on the hearts of the people. That's a pretty neat trick, with symbolism that puts the stone engraving in the shade. Jeremiah reported that God was saying, "I will be their God, and they will be my people." The change that was coming would be so complete that there would no longer be need for teachers to teach the law. There would be no need for anyone to say, "Let me tell you about the Lord," because everyone would know, "from the least of them to the greatest." And in the process, God would forgive the iniquity of the people and would remember their sin no more.

So, what does all of this have to do with me or with us? This message was to the people of Judah and Israel; that is to say, the promise was to the Jewish people. So why are we bothering to read it to a Christian congregation and to preach about it on a Sunday morning just two weeks before Easter? In truth, when you read the passage you get the feeling that we are eavesdropping on someone else's mail. This is Jewish business, and you can rightfully ask what in the world it has to do with us.

Well, several things. For one, that our whole human race is bound together in remarkable ways. When you think of the way events happening in the modern Middle East -- particularly in Israel -- affect the whole world, you realize that if that nation were to be uniquely blessed, all of us would feel the divine fallout. I venture that there is no other spot on our planet where political events are more important than the few square miles that constitute the nation of Israel and the nations surrounding Israel. To see God's blessing there is to imagine wondrous events everywhere.

Then also consider this: The picture of God that Jeremiah is painting ought to make all of us feel good. God loves Israel so much that God desires to relate to them in such a special way, all of us have reason to feel

encouraged by this. Several hundred years after the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the apostle Paul said that the nation of Israel is like a plant, and that all of those persons who take Christ as their Lord become a branch on the Jewish tree. So, we get in on Jeremiah's good news. You and I are part of the Jewish story. The love that God expresses for Israel is the kind of love that God expresses for all of us.

But some of you may still find it hard to get very excited about Jeremiah's vision. So, God is going to write the law on our hearts, so that we won't even need anyone to teach us about God. Well, yes, that means we can eliminate the pastors' salaries, but that's not the biggest news of the day, unless you're me or Andi. Having God's law written into our hearts: That won't pay the mortgage or take care of us in our old age. It won't solve the problems of Medicare or rising taxes. It may be nice Sunday talk, but what does it have to do with all the rest of the week? What did Jeremiah mean, "there's a great day coming?"

I submit to you that the biggest problem in our world -- in a sense, the true *root* problem -- is a HEART one.

When I read that major corporations are backing out of their pension commitments to their employees, leaving them devastated as they face retirement years, I know that we're talking about an economic problem. But believe me, in back of the economic problem is a spiritual one -- a problem of the HEART. Our corporations -- like individuals -- get into great financial trouble because they become greedy, and because some of the officers use poor judgment that is often the result of mean and narrow-minded thinking; and because labor and management can't get along with one another, and because people who ought to be working for the common good spend so much of their energy taking care of Number One that they forget that if Number Two and Number Three and all the way down to Number 2365 are miserable, Number One is going to suffer some day, too. Economics isn't simply a matter of the so-called bottom line; it is in so many ways the upper line, the line of character, godliness and HEART.

Yes, someone says somewhat doubtfully, but even if the world's economics were healed in some measure, you still have to cope with natural disasters -- tsunamis and Katrinas and a variety of other hurricanes and floods and famines. I agree; and yet I remind myself how much better we could meet such tragedies if we were only a little smarter -- thinking with our HEARTS; and when I say this, I'm not talking simply about meteorology, I'm talking about the moral intelligence that would make us see the bigger picture of our planet, people and all of creation. ... the moral intelligence, the Spirit and HEART for us to take better care of one another; that would help us to prevent some people's pain before it happens.

And this, too. In this world as we know it, all of us face a certain amount of health problems, either for ourselves or for those we love. And we all know that someday we will have to do business with death, either in the loss of someone we love or in our own departure from this planet. There are certain "inevitables" about this life as we know it now. I can't promise us exemption from pain and sickness and death. But believe me, I can promise us that to the degree that God's law is written on our hearts, we are equipped to overcome the worst of whatever pain life may bring our way. We can't stop sickness completely, or loneliness or death, but we can conquer them. When God dwells within our HEARTS, we win. Always and always, we are ultimately on the winning side.

You know what? I don't know all that Jeremiah had in mind when he announced a new covenant in the days ahead. But I do know this, we are just two weeks away from Easter, and I have a feeling that all of this is somehow related to the Easter story.

God loves all of creation so much that God ***promised ... unconditionally*** to forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive...God ***promised*** to forget all of our sins, KNOWING that we would continue to keep sinning DESPITE the covenant of God's *promised, guaranteed LOVE*. Jeremiah knew this some 25 or 26 centuries ago. The Lord declared ***I WILL forgive*** and ***I WILL forget....*** there was no condition or expiration date as God spoke of the future ... the future that is now.

There's a Great Day coming, and Easter is part of it. A wondrous, overpowering, eternal part – and that covenantal, ongoing day is located within our hearts.

AMEN