

## **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

31:31 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.

31:32 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.

31:33 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.

31:34 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.

## **Lenten Reflection**

When I was growing up, my dad worked for the Baptist Retirement Homes of North Carolina, and at that time, it was an organization whose funding was significantly tied to the generosity of churches throughout our state. As the primary leader of the organization that meant Daddy was also its chief promoter and fundraiser. And back in those days, the way you connected with churches was to visit them in person. For the better part of three and a half decades, my Daddy spent nearly every Wednesday night and every Sunday

morning traveling from Murphy to Manteo, and all points in between. And by default, so did his family.

40 years later, I could probably still give you his stump speech. The idea was simple. There were generations of faithful Baptists, not just the MISSES AND MISTERS we've all called by their first names, but also ministers, missionaries, and other servants of the church. And in their last season of life, they needed the faithful, generous, and compassionate support afforded to them, that they had, for so long, given to others. But they also needed to know that the season awaiting them could be the best of times, a season of vibrance, and filled with evidence of God's joy, love, and good purposes.

I remember that my dad's message was always rooted in the idea of good news that seemed too good to be true. God never plateaus! And Daddy always spun (and still does in fact!) tales of seasoned citizens seizing kin-dom moments; youthfulness in every age.

This morning, one story he told is on my mind. I don't know if they were real people, but I feel like I've met them before. The story goes that 'Ol Ma and 'Ol Pa were driving down the road in their old pickup truck. And you know in those old cabs, back when seatbelts were merely a suggestion, you could sit three people across the front seat with ease. But today, Ma and Pa had a good bit of space in between them. And as they were driving, and having a leisurely conversation, about the weather I suppose, another pickup truck came flying by.

And in this truck, there's a much younger couple, and they are all snuggled up, sitting side by side. The driver even has his arm around his young love.

‘Ol Ma looks at ‘Ol Pa, and she says, “You remember when we used to sit like that?”

‘Ol Pa replies, “I ain’t moved.”

Time creates distance. But, often, the movement is so incremental, we hardly notice.

Jeremiah, along with a number of other Old Testament writers, reminds us of a people who once nestled right up next to God. They longed for God, longed to be close, longed to sing out loud to the radio together, longed to dream about a life wrapped up in one another.

The exhilaration of the Exodus, the crossing of the Jordan, the expanse of Solomon’s kingdom, yes indeed, Spring was in the air. The people experienced a season where their awareness and gratitude for God’s provisions aligned with their desire and intentionality to be partners and collaborators in God’s creation.

But life happens.

Freedom from Pharaoh seems a little less miraculous in the rearview mirror. The wilderness is hard. And predictability, especially for meals, and wages, and routine regains an appeal. Stable is sexy.

And new lands bring new challenges that are met with new anxieties. Sure, God can best Pharaoh, and Canaan’s nice and all, but what happens in this land of giants? How can we thrive in such a place?

And it turns out all of Solomon’s wisdom, and all of Solomon’s riches, and even the cavernous ceilings and sparkling jewels of Solomon’s temple aren’t enough to compensate for half-hearted relationships. The kingdom will fracture. The people will long for the lesser goods and lesser gods.

We hear, repeatedly, a story of burnout. We hear a story of fatigue. We hear a story of infidelity. We hear a story of separation and distance. Covenants express the idea of God, people, and land living in accordance with God’s good purposes. God keeps covenanting. The people covenant for a while, and then they dissolve, or break from, or ignore their part of the commitment.

Here in Jeremiah’s time, the people find themselves in exile. And they wonder, “How can we sense God’s presence in a foreign land? How can we covenant to experience the impossible?”

Jeremiah offers words of hope. God’s going to do a new thing. God isn’t creating a covenant that must be housed – that is one that must be carved on stone tablets and protected in stone temples. This isn’t the Smithsonian or the British Museum! God is going to partner with God’s people in such a way as to make God’s presence evident in their hearts and minds. The covenant isn’t an expression of what we hold, or we have, or we do. The covenant is an expression, indeed it is a living embodiment, of all that we are.

And here’s why I am really thinking of ‘Ol Ma and ‘Ol Pa today. When my Daddy told the story, I believe his intent was to remind us that we don’t age out of vibrancy, that we never reach a point where we are too old to both hope for and experience God’s abundance. And when I hear that story, I’m left with that Advent feeling, the

expectant hope, that ‘Ol Ma’s gonna say, “Well, let me scootch on back over, Pa,” and together they are gonna claim a piece of God’s covenant, they are gonna drink in God’s abundance, they are gonna sit at the welcome table. I’m reminded that we can move.

But here’s something better. ‘Ol Pa and ‘Ol Ma, the people in exile, those wandering in the wilderness, those waiting in a season of Lent – each of these people says, “We haven’t moved. We’re game for renewal.” But that doesn’t mean they, we, are actively moving toward a new vision.

But do you know who is moving? Always? God is moving! God is always moving! God doesn’t just desire or long for us to be in covenant. God works, always, for us to be in covenant. God pursues us. In Egypt. In the wilderness. In exile. When we are gathered. When we are scattered. When we are focused. When we are distracted. When we are at our best, and when we’re not. God meets us where we are, and God loves us where we are.

Have you noticed, even when God is entitled to feel lukewarm about us, to dissolve Their end of the agreement, and believe me, we’ve given God plenty of reasons to do so...God never wavers. God keeps working to make the covenant stronger, to invite us into the process, to help us reach our potential. God is going to write Godself into humanity. God is writing Godself into humanity.

Here's the image of Jeremiah’s covenant for me. It’s in Luke’s parable of the prodigal sons. A daddy sprints across a field to embrace a child who has come home from a journey steeped in wanderlust. “You are never lost to me,” he says. And on the very same evening, his other child, wounded and hurt by the callousness

of their sibling, storms out of the banquet. The Daddy says, “Please come back, all that is mine is yours.” And this to say nothing of daughters never mentioned. This daddy isn’t enforcing a covenant, he’s bringing life to it.

I’m reminded of God’s grace for Ninevah despite Jonah’s misgivings.

I’m reminded of God’s response to Calvary. There was no fire and brimstone, just life, reclaimed from violence. And a thousand tongues of a thousand pilgrims transcended by the oneness of the Holy Spirit.

God never, NEVER, not once, chooses to use breach of contract as a reason to end God’s covenant with God’s people. God is always moving, always creating, always imagining how humanity can live in harmony with Creator and creation.

Here’s a final thought. Brother Will Campbell, didn’t talk about covenant all that much. He used another phrase: “be reconciled.”

You see, I don’t believe we are creatures of a sinful nature. We just aren’t creatures of perfection. And whether we are righteous or unrighteous, or somewhere in between, we are creatures with the capacity to both deeply love and deeply wound one another. And our nature is to be in relationship with one another. And if we are in a relationship, something that’s real and authentic, at some point, whether intentionally or unintentionally, we will both love and wound one another.

We must decide that woundedness is not terminal. We must believe, indeed we must work with all of our might, to transform

**Lenten Reflection**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Fifth Sunday of Lent, 3/17/2024**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34**



present pain into future healing. We mustn't, ever, believe that forgiveness severs relationships, or that it is a sign of weakness. We must dare to believe that forgiveness is a launching pad to a deeper, more profound, more divine love.

A covenant isn't a scorecard. It's loving one another, wounding one another, forgiving one another, healing with one another, and loving again. And repeating the cycle as many time as it takes. It's not about giving up or giving in. It's about giving of ourselves as God gives of Godself.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it in on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Hey, Ma, hey, Pa, scoot to the left! We got some living to do!

May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.