

Today we wrap up our series in the Book of Jeremiah with a beautiful and theologically powerful passage that has probably generated more interest than any other in Jeremiah and is claimed as “the best known and most relied upon of all of Jeremiah’s promises” (Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*). As a quick refresher, the Book of Jeremiah isn’t all good news. It can be most difficult to read, as it painfully reenacts the traumatic violence of war and exile. The grief experienced among the people, including the prophet, is most certainly real. In the midst of life as the exiles know it, the prophet Jeremiah offers some harsh words of indictment – as well as some words of hope and forgiveness. We must remember the setting of persistent dishonesty and idolatry into which Jeremiah speaks both harsh and hopeful words. They broke the covenant with God which was made at Sinai (Ex. 19-24) and in Deuteronomy involving justice for the most vulnerable. They broke the relationship- they broke up the marriage, if you will. They didn’t obey the Torah- God’s revealed teaching and guidance for God’s people. You can imagine the exiles surprise when they think the prophet Jeremiah is going to beat them up with a tongue lashing for their behavior but instead he offers these words of hope and forgiveness- signs of an interior renovation. Chapters 30 & 31 are known as the “Book of Comfort.” Because it’s like the “old prophet of doom and gloom all of a sudden says, ‘But that was then. This is now. God’s going to make a new covenant with Israel and this new covenant will not be written on stones but instead on people’s hearts” (Doug Bratt, Center for Excellence in Preaching). **PRAY. READ. Jeremiah 31:31-34**

Part of the challenge with today’s text is it has “frequently been preempted by Christians as though Jews belong to the old covenant now nullified and Christians

are the sole heirs of the new covenant” (Brueggemann). This view is called supersessionism. This interpretation of this text and other New Testament texts have sometimes contributed to the mistreatment or even death of Jewish people. Hear me when I say that when it comes to the Bible context is ALWAYS important. Jeremiah is absolutely clear that the new covenant has to do first with “the people of Israel and Judah” (v. 31b). The new covenant is to be accompanied by a repopulation of the land and a rebuilding of Jerusalem, as it is given to a dispirited people in exile. Yes, as Christians, “we enjoy a wondrous relationship with God through Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, but our participation in the new covenant in no way excludes the initial recipients and their heirs” (The CEB Study Bible, p. 1261). This passage helps us to see that the new requires and depends on the old. Yet, this text also uses the language of discontinuity. The deep discontinuity between the “old” covenant and the “new” covenant is not about the Old Testament and New Testament nor is it between Jews and Christians. Rather, the discontinuity is between the unruly Jews prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the transformed Jews after the destruction who embrace the covenant newly offered by God. The requirements of the old covenant from Sinai were outside of the individual. Whereas, the requirements of the new covenant are now within each individual. In other words, the old is not replaced but reaffirmed as the same commandments given at Sinai but now to be written on their hearts. Jeremiah’s audience knows that stone tablets can be broken and scrolls can be destroyed. “By contrast, the covenant written on the heart describes a natural, not an artificial relationship, one that proceeds from innate knowledge. Because it is God’s torah that is written on the heart, the ability to respond to God becomes natural” (Margaret Odell, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). With

this new covenant written on their hearts there will be a common, shared knowledge of God. What is emphasized here as new is not that Israel will know and observe God's *law*, but that Israel will know *God*, and *they'll know God just as much from their experience of God's forgiveness and mercy as they will from God's engraved instructions.*

Thus the commandments will no longer be external rules which invited hostility but now will bring a new, embraced, internal identity-giving mark (Brueggemann). This newness is what God has been doing for a long time, and "it is no wonder the early church took this up from Jeremiah and claimed the new covenant of God for the New Testament and the new beginning and the new assertion of God's readiness for us in Christ. This is indeed the stuff of resurrection to new life. Thus informed by Judaism, the early Christian church understood Jesus to be not only a child of but a witness to and a performer of the covenant. As Christians we recognize Jesus as the mediator of the covenant, the go-between concerning our relationship with God and the world" (Brueggemann, *Collection of Sermons*, vols. 2 & 3).

Jeremiah is speaking to all of Israel- everyone from the least to the greatest- who will stand on equal ground in terms of access to a relationship with God. All of Israel are given this promise. Throughout Holy Scripture, God doesn't promise that nothing bad will happen to us. What God promises is to be our God and we will be God's people, and God promises to write God's instructions on our hearts. So then what does it mean for God's people to carry God's instructions for life within their bodies? Don't hearts break just as stone tablets do? A child once

asked the rabbi, “Why is YHWH’s word written ON my heart, not IN?” To which the rabbi replied, “YHWH writes the Word on your heart because it will break. And when your heart breaks, the Word will fall INTO and fill your broken and breaking heart.” What a beautiful and comforting image the rabbi leaves this child and each of us...a reminder that God’s love and teaching sets the beat- the pulse- of all that we do- especially when we’re grieving and/or suffering.

In this last verse of today’s passage, Jeremiah offers perhaps the most crucial among God’s promises: forgiveness of sins- a clean slate. Jeremiah is not offering words of advice; he is offering words of assurance- what we cannot do for ourselves is given us. God’s gracious initiative and unconditional forgiveness makes possible full restoration and healing of relationships, which is the sole basis for this new covenant. What extraordinary grace! “Jeremiah is speaking of a day when Israel will obey God’s law not because she’s supposed to but because she wants to. She’ll long to obey God’s law because God has shaped her hearts and minds that way” (Bratt). Yet, it is most difficult in our context today to imagine how forgiveness can come about, as we live in a context often overrun by violence and hate.

What it would be like to be forgiven or to forgive? My Old Testament professor, Walter Brueggemann, answers, *It is to forego old hates and old fears, the old hates of racism, the old fears that propel greed, the old resentments against the poor, and the old hostile dismissals of those “left behind.” To be forgiven [or to forgive] is to receive energy for new life. The newness begins in honest petition; however, it ends in a joyous unburdening* (Brueggemann). The text invites not only

those Israelites and Judeans in exile but also to us to “stand in grateful awe before the miracle of forgiveness, to receive it and then [to offer it], taking from it a new, regenerated life” (Brueggemann). And once in a while we catch a glimpse of God’s new covenant of love at work.

Upon first coming to Triune- almost a year ago- I remember Robin, one of the social workers here, asking the staff to pray for a parishioner named John, who participates in Welcome Home- a support group for the newly housed. Here is some of John’s story. John came to Triune a few years ago on disability for some mental health issues that had kept him from receiving housing of his own. He soon began to reconnect with mental health services but around that same time John got hit by a car while crossing the street not too far from here. He sustained multiple injuries from the waist down and was in the hospital and rehab for months. When he was discharged, he had no housing so he had to go to the shelter. John was challenged by the different personalities in the shelter so he was motivated to begin working with Robin and Andrew to find housing. They offered him options, but he kept putting them off- even when he discovered that he qualified for some housing through Mental Health. During this time John had to have a series of follow-up surgeries to have pins and rods redone, but several of these procedures were delayed due to Covid. During this time, John miraculously got placed into housing with some case management support through Greenville Mental Health. He now has someone helping him navigate all his medicine and surgeries and doctor’s appointments. I finally met John a few months ago in the dining hall, as he was facing his 13<sup>th</sup> surgery since his accident. He was still in a lot of pain, yet he smiled as he greeted me. We prayed together, as his surgery was that afternoon, and I asked for permission to share his story

one day with y'all. He gladly gave me permission and offered to give me the all the details one day. You see a day or two after John's accident, John told someone in the hospital that he had forgiven whoever hit him because God wanted him to do so. A week or so later a relative was visiting with John and asked him what he remembered from the accident. She went on to see if John knew who hit him. He didn't know nor remember, but it turns out that John actually knew the person who hit him. John, smiling, looked up and said, "I forgive him. Please ask him to come and see me." John shared with me that the person who hit him has never come to visit, and he tells me that he still forgives because God has put it on his heart to forgive this person. John's energy is spent on healing instead of on holding hate for the person who did this to him. Forgiveness is never easy, yet it is possible because of a God who makes all things possible...a God who forgives and, in God's time, makes all things new.

As Jeremiah puts it- the future for the exiled people of Israel and for us is tattooed on our hearts by divine teaching and love, which leads us to right living with our neighbors. "Telling the truth about our beauty and our brokenness is at the heart of our Christian faith. The consequence can be passion, transformation, healing- a new heart and a right spirit flowing out of the [forgiving and] passionate heart of God" (Susan Andrews, *Christian Century*, 3.24.09). So how are you living by what God has tattooed on your heart? Where have you witnessed God bringing newness into the world? No matter how broken the world might seem, 'the time is coming, says the Lord' (Kelly Murphy, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org))! Thanks be to God! Amen.