

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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. 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. 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. 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.

“Knowing the New”

Jeremiah’s Book of Comfort which comprises chapters 30 and 31 was written to give hope to God’s people in exile in Babylon. God’s prophet had warned of wrath for the people’s sinfulness for years. The days he warned of had dawned. During a series of deportations, many Jews were exiled to Babylon and the temple was destroyed. Eventually Jeremiah himself would be forced to flee Jerusalem and was taken by friends to refuge in Egypt. The Book of Comfort’s tone is a shift from his earlier proclamations. Now words of comfort come to the exiles. Words of hope and restoration.

The adage “Out with the old; in with the new” seems to apply to our text. What is this “new covenant” though? Is it a break from God’s prior covenants with Israel? Christian tradition has tended toward supersessionism when we read this text. This means that past Christians, and some modern ones, claim that what God did later on in Jesus to extend God’s covenant to the Gentiles, supercedes God’s covenant with Israel. They point to this passage as justification for such a theological position. Such a view is not a part of the plain meaning of the text! We find in the passage that God makes yet another new covenant with all of Israel who are scattered in exile. Jeremiah’s words show God rebuilding the old covenant anew for Israel’s sake, not for Gentiles. God’s intent remains the same “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Only now the people from the least to the greatest will know God in a new way! Instead of God taking the people by the hand to bring them out of exile—mirroring Egypt, God will put the law within them and write it on their hearts. God chose to forgive and forget Israel’s sin providing for their reconciliation in this new covenant.

Israel will again know and claim God with them on an intimate level. This time they would be obedient because God will inwardly transform human hearts. Jeremiah puts his money where his mouth is. Shortly after our passage Jeremiah pays good money to buy a field in the land of Benjamin—right as it is being seized in battle! He bought it because it was a sign from “The Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: that houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” by the Jewish people. It is a tangible symbol that the new covenant will be fulfilled by God!

It seems apparent that God was determined to stick with the covenant people—despite knowing they would continue to break God’s heart. God simply chose not to be God without them. We hear this in Jeremiah’s words to those in exile, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me.” After much affliction, hope and

salvation came to those that had broken their end of a covenant with God. What the people have broken, God remakes anew. Old and new covenants are bound together!

Knowing God in one's heart is more than an old story retold over and over as an observer. The old story must interact with the new way God offers restoration, forgiveness and life out of the death of exile. The new thing God is constantly doing then and now must be proclaimed. What we glean from the scriptures and Judeo-Christian history should lead us to fresh insights in our lives. Like Jeremiah, we must proclaim the new way God is at work in our lives. The authority of forgiveness was granted and written on the hearts of the people Israel by God in Jeremiah. Our Greek scripture alludes to the hour that has come to change everything for those who would come to know Christ as our savior; the hour will show Jesus with the authority to forgive our sin. This is how God brings us in from exile and alienation from God and one another. We know the new as it is written on our hearts and they are transformed.

Paul Tillich commented on our Jeremiah passage in light of what God has done in Jesus for us saying, "And so I repeat: the first thing about the new is that we cannot force it and cannot calculate it. All we can do is to be ready for it....The second thing we must say about the new: it must break the power of the old, not only in reality, but also in our memory; and one is not possible without the other....We cannot be born anew if the power of the old is not broken within us; and it is not broken so long as it puts the burden of guilt upon us....Forgiveness means a throwing out of the old...by the strength of the new."¹ We know the new and we throw out the old as our hearts are opened by God's revelation to us and the Word dwells within. When we hear the promise of forgiveness, love and God's grace and apply that to our lives and the way we view others.

My friends and I went to see "Inherit the Wind" at the Geva Theater two weeks ago. In this fictional take on the Scopes Trials in the 1920s, the writers show a group of small town Christians who believe that God's word is written on their hearts through a strict literal or fundamentalist reading of the Bible. When that reading was challenged, they felt that all knowledge of God and obedience to God was lost. Their view of evolution according to a literal interpretation of Genesis One and Two had to be preserved—no one could deviate from a literal interpretation! For me this view of God's word written on our hearts is way too narrow. Strict literalism has little to do with God's forgiveness, covenant and love. It stems from human fear of losing God's love, not that new covenant written on our hearts.

I believe that knowing the new, the word God writes on our hearts, is best shared by our personal faith stories. When I met with the PNC they asked me to share some of my faith journey and I used a method of faith sharing taught to me by Dr. Craig Dykstra the head of the religion division of the Lilly Endowment. In this method you share your faith through relationships that have revealed God to us. I'd like to share three vignettes of how I "know the Lord" how God has written the good news on my heart.

When I was a young child and we were in the middle of a move from Yuma to Tempe, I became sick with meningitis. My Grandma Godfrey took care of me the whole time. She cuddled me and fed me chicken soup. I was nurtured and unabashedly loved. I felt God's presence and love for me through her care by the warmth of her tender touch and calming presence. She was the presence of the Other: compassionate, loving, providing. This scene is the earliest spiritual moment or time of my life I can remember.

Linda Hunter was our Associate Pastor's wife, my youth leader and my confidant. I babysat for David and Linda's children before I was old enough to drive. Linda would come and pick me up and we would talk on the way to their home. It was on one such trip with Linda that I took a great step of faith as God used Linda to reveal the limits of any human relationship. I had been unable to accept my own families' limitations as a teen. I was griping and moaning and then these words came out of Linda's mouth that hit me like a ton of bricks. I can't remember exactly what she said, but it made me realize for the first time that God was the only One who was with me always. God was the only One who would ever meet all of my needs and understand everything about me. My family would always fall short as I do for others. No relationship except God's covenant with me could be all knowing and loving.

Then there was Dr. Kenda Dean's *Spirituality in Small Groups* class. Dr. Dean is a great professor at Princeton. I wasn't enrolled in her greatest class ever though. We only met once a week and our class was cancelled about half the time, for good reasons, but cancelled nonetheless. I didn't learn as much as I had hoped about small groups from the class, but I learned something even more important from Dr. Dean. Every time we met, she loved on us. She made our small class into a celebration each time. It was like a perpetual love feast with the atmosphere set just right. Food and drinks laid out for our nourishment. Dr. Dean is hospitality incarnate. I learned all about the importance of showing God's abundant love through hospitality for the other. Dr. Dean delighted in our lives and provided much needed nourishment in the midst of academia. Is there a better way to teach God's faithfulness to us?

Jeremiah's Book of Comfort gives hope to the faithful, even in exile. Hope that they will know God's new covenant, that they will know the Lord in their hearts again. Come in, come back, speak up, share your knowledge of God what God has written upon your heart. Share the story that God has given you with another. The good news should not remain captive within us! It is meant to be proclaimed as God reveals it to us and we come to know it. Amen.

¹ "Behold, I am Doing a New Thing." Paul Tillich, from *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 1955. At *Religion Online*.