

Lent 5 March 17, 2024 Jeremiah 31:31-34

Within the huge collection of prophetic oracles that make up the fifty-two chapters of Jeremiah, we find more than tears, more than frank admissions of pain, and more than convictions about the evils of Judah. We also find startling promises of hope.

Jeremiah, perhaps more than any other prophet brooded, anguished, was persecuted and wept and wailed over his people and their sad history of broken covenant.

Today's reading is located within the section of Jeremiah known as The Little Book of Consolation (chs. 30-33) where the subject matter has shifted decidedly from Jeremiah's 40 year ministry of proclaiming judgment by means of the Babylonian invasions to a concern with the future restoration of the people beyond the impending exile.

I suspect Jeremiah may have been mightily relieved for when God called him, he received a six-fold task, to "pluck up and pull down," to "destroy and overthrow," and "to build and to plant." He has spent the bulk of his prophetic career announcing the former four demands, but now can turn to the latter two.

This hopeful passage in Jeremiah is spoken at a time when one would hardly expect it. The time is 587 BCE, or roughly 600 years before the birth of Jesus. The Babylonians have conquered the kingdom of Judah and by force removed from them the two clearest symbols that the Jewish people had of their God: the temple in Jerusalem, destroyed, and their king, Zedekiah, taken away in chains. So in midst of exile, Jeremiah raises hope. He is in a captured Jerusalem writing to the exiles in Babylon.

Jean and I discussing this during the week and I said There is an irony here; it would be like when we see those images of total destruction in Gaza and suddenly a voice was raised uttering a word of hope, restoration, home coming, forgiveness. And then we both stopped and pondered , Would that be an insensitive thing to do at that time; how could you possibly do that, what about solidarity with people suffering? This doesn't seem like the appropriate time to be speaking of the nearness of God. I wonder how his words were received by the exiled people.

Jeremiah turns to the central concept in the identity of his people. They are Covenant People. People of the Covenant and through this Lent we have had a number of Covenant based bible readings. Covenant was at the heart of the stories of the great figures Noah, where covenant is made with the inhabitants

of earth, Abraham and Sarah and the promise of descendants, of the Exodus story and the giving of the 10 commandments, of the glory days of King David and the promise of a descendant being on the throne.

Covenant is about relationship – about 2 parties, individuals or groups of people, binding themselves to each other. Covenant has aspects of a contract but in a contract relationship you simply have an agreement where if both of you are of mutual benefit to each other you will keep the relationship. I agree to provide these services or goods for you in a fit and timely manner and you agree to pay me a certain amount of money – that would be the classic contract. But if you don't deliver, you stuff up on providing the goods in the required time frame and all bets are off. I am released from my obligation to pay you. In covenant it is far more personal, intense, mutual. What happens to one party it is almost like it happens to the other. Or at least has great impact on them. And the great hope of covenant is that it means there is some basis for the restoration of relationship; it means there is the hope of forgiveness.

Law played the role of protecting the sacredness of the covenant relationship. It was divine guidance; it gave the responsibilities, privileges and obligations of the covenant partner. Torah - better translated as instruction or guidance than law in the way we in the secular West understand the term. The best way to read the 10 commandments is as - "instructions for not falling back into slavery". Law is to encourage us to live as covenant people. We should not think of it as an end in itself. Sometimes people slip out of the heartfelt response God seeks and fall under law – that is going through the motions, obeying the outward obligations but with no deep sincerity. Religious people are always in danger of losing their first love and perhaps even barely conscious of it, beginning to live merely by law. We cannot find it in our hearts to be gracious any longer to someone who infuriates us, we are tempted to cut a corner at work because no one would ever be able to pin it onto us, we fail speak up at a critical time. At any of these times we may find ourselves relying on the safety net of the Law. Not our heartfelt response, but what we know is required of us as the Covenant People. At such times maybe that is all we can do. But the danger is if we spend a lifetime in that space we grow hard, crusty souls and that becomes a problem. For then we have lost the ability to choose any other course of action. It is to this problem that Jeremiah directs his prophecy.

And what Jeremiah has noted in his passage today is that to be the covenant partner of the eternal God was no empty thing. It carried with it tremendous responsibilities. For Israel was drawn into this relationship not just for their own sake but as a representative, on behalf of all peoples and this placed

ethical and ritual demands/obligations. And they in turn would be blessed as no other nation. A light to the nations. So the plan went.

I said the Law was there to protect covenant. The law however could never bring about that which God looked for, the responsive, heartfelt desire to please God. The law is not the problem, but the human heart. It needs a joyfully received, flesh and blood law written into human lives. More than doing the actions of Covenant people out of habit, or fear, or regard for the law. Doing the actions of the Covenant people out of love of God and a heartfelt desire to live close to the Holy God. God will "write it on their hearts," the heart being the center of will and intelligence in Hebrew anthropology.

Its newness consists less in its content than in the way it will be given to the people. God now determines to "place the Torah within them." And to be sure that this new gift is more permanent than the older covenant,

Receive the new heart that the joy of keeping covenant with God may be known by you.