

An Already, Not Yet, Promise

(Lent 5)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

John 2:13-16

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It 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. ³³But 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. ³⁴No 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.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

An Already, Not Yet, Promise

It isn't working.

All Lent we have been reading Old Testament stories about God's covenant. We began with Noah and God's promise to no longer respond to human violence with divine violence. There was Abraham, to whom God promised a homeland and heirs more numerous than the stars in the night sky. When God brought Moses and the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, God met them on Mount Sinai and we saw the covenant deepen as God offered the Israelites an opportunity to be in relationship with God—to be God's people as God was their God. And, when the people agreed, God gave them the Ten Commandments—descriptions of what a human life lived with God looked like—a covenant carved in stone to last for generations. As the people begin trying to live into this new way of life, God steps in time and time again to clarify, reinforce, and reassure—working to show the people that God's desire for them is abundant life; we saw an example of this last week when God took and transformed that which would have caused death, turning it into something that might instead bring about new life. But by the time we arrive at our passage from Jeremiah, one thing has become abundantly clear: the covenant isn't working.

When we left the Israelites last week, they were still wandering in the desert, closing in on the land God promised to Abraham's descendants, but not yet in it. Our story this week picks up 1,000 or so years later; and, as you might expect, a lot has happened. The people arrived in the Promised Land and lived as tribal nations until, at the people's insistence, God established a monarchy, creating an everlasting covenant with the house of David, promising a dynasty that would never end (2 Samuel 7:1-17).

But time went by and the people began to forget all that God had done for them. The Ten Commandments began to be seen not as descriptions of what a life lived with God looks like but instead as injunctions, obligations the people must abide by so that God will look with favor upon them. The bronze snake, the symbol of God's desire to bring life out of death, became a permanent fixture, an idol the people prayed to for healing and salvation. And over time, the gods and customs of Israel's more powerful neighbors began to seep into their own religious practices, just in case, until even the Temple, built to be home for God, became a marketplace, a sacrificial system designed to elevate the people to God; a tower reminiscent of the one built in Babel. Only this time, instead of ascending rungs, the people assign priests to offer sacrifices on their behalf, the smoke rising to God in an attempt to secure God's blessings, to curry favor and forgiveness. God's Temple, God's home, has become not the House of the Lord in which the people might dwell with God, but a place of leverage, a means through which the people try to control God.

The covenant isn't working.

God wanted to dwell with the people, partner with them, but the people keep forgetting, keep hedging their bets and looking for easier ways to live lives of ease. So much so that in chapter 17, Jeremiah writes that their sins (the things that perpetually turn them away from God) are engraved on the tablets of their hearts.

By the time we read Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant, everything has fallen apart. The Babylonians have invaded. They have destroyed the Temple and carted the people into exile. The Israelites have lost everything, and the prevailing belief is that the Sinai covenant is spent—that God has given up on the people and the covenant is no more.

The Book of Lamentations, which was written in this period, gives voice to the people's grief and despair: "we stretch out our hands, but there is no one to comfort us. God has made our teeth grind on gravel; God has made us cower in ashes; our souls are bereft of peace; we have forgotten what happiness is; so we say, 'Gone is our glory and all that we had hoped for from the Lord' (1:17 & 3:16-18). What else could they believe?

How can you possibly believe in God's covenant if you don't have the homeland that Abraham was promised? How can you experience God's presence if you don't have the beautiful temple that was first dreamed of in the wilderness, without your community to remind you of God's laws and blessings?

It isn't working.

The people cannot keep the covenant. Their world has fallen apart and they are certain that all is lost.

But God is not finished.

From the very beginning of creation, God has wanted to be in relationship with humanity, and our God is nothing if not persistent. And so God tells the prophet Jeremiah to preach of a new covenant, a covenant that cannot be forgotten, a covenant that cannot be broken or destroyed because it will be a covenant written on our very heart. “No longer will the law be engraved in stone and displayed in rotundas for all to see but none to follow. The days are surely coming [the prophet proclaims] when the law will be engraved [on] the people’s hearts and displayed in their lives.” The Temple may be destroyed, but it no longer matters—if God’s covenant is inscribed on our hearts than God no longer requires a Temple in which to dwell because God dwells in each of us. No longer will God be bound by a construct of human hands, shut up in a Temple to which only a few have access. God is inscribing God’s Torah, God’s teachings, God’s desires, God’s dreams and plans for the world not on stone tablets, but on living, beating hearts.

“Despite all the ways the people have broken faith with God—God will not break faith with them. ... God will bring newness out of destruction. God will bring hope where there is no hope. God will bring life out of death. God will make a way where there is no way.”

The question, of course, is when? “The days are surely coming,” says the Lord. But 500 years come and go and the Temple is rebuilt and still Jesus is turning over tables, still the people are separating themselves from God, offering sacrifices instead of living lives of justice and peace.

“After those days,” says the Lord. But which days exactly?

For the New Testament writers, Jesus was the one to embody the new covenant that Jeremiah prophesied. But 2,000 years have come and gone and while houses of worship are no longer marketplaces of sacrifice, they remain places many of us attend out of sense of obligation or in hopes of currying divine favor or forgiveness, hoping that God hears the prayers of those in sanctuaries more loudly than those on golf courses.

“After those days,” says the Lord, “I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts.”

When we translate this passage into English, the promise becomes a future one—something God will do. But in Hebrew the verb tense used isn’t the future tense but the perfect tense. Now, unless you’re a real grammar nut, this likely means nothing to you and you are real close to zoning out for a few moments, but stay with me for a second.

Occasionally, when you're reading one of the Hebrew prophets in Hebrew, which no one does, but just pretend, you come across a verb that seems to be in the wrong tense. You'll be reading about what God is going to do in the future, but all of the sudden, one verb is written in what appears to be the past tense (there's more to it than that, but basically). It's called the prophetic perfect tense and it was used when prophets were so convinced, so certain of God's future actions that they wrote about them as if they had already happened. Something like, "in the days to come, God has put God's law on our hearts." It sounds rather clunky when we try to translate it literally, so we often just use the future tense instead. But we miss something when we do that.

In the days to come, God has already put God's law, God's teaching, God's desires for the world, on our heart. The covenant Jeremiah speaks of is an already, not yet, covenant. It has already happened, but it is not yet complete, which is good news and bad news. The good news is that God is not done with us yet. 2,500 years have passed since Jeremiah first preached and the world is still falling apart around us, but God's covenant has not been exhausted—God has already begun engraving it on our hearts. The bad news is that it isn't complete yet, which means we still have to work for it. We still need to remind ourselves and each other of who God is and how God calls us to live, of God's desire to dwell with us so that we might lead lives of abundance, so that all of creation might flourish.

God has already made God's covenant, but for now, until those days come, it is up to us to partner with God in bringing it to fruition. As our benediction this Lenten season puts it, God keeps God's promises, which means we are called to be walking rainbows, bearing God's promise into the world.

Amen.