

Sermon for March 18, 2018 – “Promise Kept”

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B – Texts: Jeremiah 31:27-34; John 12: 20-33

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This is yet another passage that centers on the covenant of God’s promise to us as His people. But, this one’s different. It’s not written on a rainbow or a stone but deep in the people’s hearts. Essentially, this covenant is a part of their very being. The context in which Jeremiah wrote today’s text was likely the period immediately following the Babylonian exile which had occurred in roughly the late 7th century BC. The temple and the city of Jerusalem have been totally destroyed. Everything that gave the ancient Israelites their identity or gave meaning to their existence is gone. Now, they’ve become subjects of the Persian king but God, through the prophet Jeremiah, gives a vision of reconstruction and renewal. This time things will be different. The Book of Jeremiah is sometimes called the Book of Consolation. The people have spent generations disobeying God expecting God to give them more...even running from God. And yet, God loves them. God promises love and faithfulness and gives it over and over, and over again, whether or not the people keep their part of the bargain. Jeremiah addresses the people’s suffering with words of comfort and hope not just long ago but today as well. The timing of the ultimate promise is indefinite. Many would rather interpret this as a “renewed covenant.” A renewed covenant is a fulfillment of the promises that God made earlier but with a deeper and profound meaning. And, even though the earlier covenant was broken with God, rather than cursing the people, He forgives and renews.

The use of the word “husband” implies a familial, intimate relationship and this is the type of relationship that God envisions with His people. The future promises are certain and the law, this time written on the hearts of God’s people, is no longer a requirement. It’s part of who they are.

Now, it’s easy for us to read this through our Christian lens and, yet, God says “all.” God says “...ALL shall know Me, from the least to the greatest.” This is more than just a projection (or prediction) of the promised Messiah. So much more! This is about God’s vision for who we’re to be, the kind of people we’re to become. God’s written the capacity for love and faithfulness into us. God’s written Himself into us making who God is, a part of who we are! A permanent part! God’s vision is written on our hearts, permanently tattooed, part of our very being. It’s as if God is remaking us from the inside out. Actually – that’s exactly what He’s doing! And see, right there’s our problem; when we try to do it on our own without God. We’ve got it all backward. Think about it. I mean, here we are. We’re trying to do the right things, say the right things, live our lives the right way, hoping that our hearts will be made right. What’s happening here is this - we work from the **outside**, often unable or unwilling to do more than scratch the surface. Meanwhile, God’s inside, working from within with heart-wrenching fervor, remaking us from the inside out. He will be our God...we will be His people. It’s just that simple. We have His word on that!

The really cool thing, though, is that the promise is well on its way toward fulfillment because the promise is embodied, in the person of Jesus who, according to our gospel reading, some Greeks have come to see. The context is the final days of Jesus’ ministry.

It's a fascinating passage and it's interesting that we're not told if these Greeks (meaning non-Jews) actually get to see Jesus. It's almost as if Jesus hearing that some Greeks want to see Him, triggers something within Jesus. He actually says: "**The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.** The days that the prophet said are surely coming are now here!" This is a new section of the Gospel. The world has begun to see Jesus. Something is about to happen. The Greeks approach Philip and request to "see" Jesus, probably to have a meeting with Him. Maybe they want to know more of who this Jesus is. Maybe they just want to talk to Him. Maybe they want to become disciples. I'm not sure the reason is all that important because regardless of why they're here, their arrival points to the fulfillment of the church's future mission. Its "Great Commission". To make disciples of Christ for the redemption of the world. This is the decisive dividing line between Jesus coming as a purely Jewish Messiah and His being the fulfillment of God's promise for the renewal and redemption of ALL of Creation.

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Now, we get that part, but what's all this stuff about wheat needing to die so that it can grow and bear more fruit? We know, thanks to the benefit of hindsight, that this has something to do with Jesus' death. But, we've got to wonder how His disciples heard this which would be confusing if you didn't know much about wheat. Now, I'm no farmer but I did a little checking and learned something fascinating. Wheat, like rice and corn, is a caryopsis. In caryopses, the outer seed and the inner fruit are connected which essentially means that the seed has to die so that the fruit can emerge and grow. If you were to dig around and uproot a stalk of wheat there's no seed. It's dead and gone. In essence, the grain must allow itself to be changed. The point is that in order for something new to happen in order for a "new" or "renewed" creation to come about we must allow ourselves to be changed.

So, what's Jesus trying to tell us? I think it's this; He's trying to tell us that the more we try to protect our lives, the more we try to hold on to the way things are or continue to resist change, the new things that God is doing, the greater chance that we'll lose not just the **new** thing but everything that we had tried so hard to keep in the first place! It's like trying to hold onto a handful of sand. The more you close your fingers the less sand you're able to hold as it slips between your fingers! Without death there can be no resurrection either for Jesus or us. We know this. Why, then, is death so hard for us to talk about? Why is it so hard for us to deal with in our lives? Everything dies, that's just the way of things. What's more, where death is concerned we have a promise from God. The promise of eternal life! And the cross of Jesus Christ is a sign of the fulfillment of that very promise! Now, I know that the cross bothers some people. It's okay to admit it. I think that on some level it should bother us but not to the point where we avoid it entirely, not to where we want to just "pass over" (pun intended) Maundy Thursday and Good Friday with its shadow and darkness and go straight to Easter. Hey – here's an idea. Next week, on Palm Sunday, let's do this; let's just wave some palms around, shout a few hearty "hosannas", sing "All Glory, Laud and Honor" as joyfully as we can and then just plan to meet back here on Easter Sunday? We can just skip Holy Week altogether. How does that sound? Sound good? We could do that. We could just focus on the Resurrection and let the cross just disappear into the background covered in Easter lilies, chocolate, and marshmallow peeps. But, if we did that we'd miss something. We'd miss an important – I'd say, crucial – part of the story.

We'd miss the part that reminds us that God is there with us in all our suffering, in all our pain, in all our heartache, in all our despair. And God in Christ there on the cross, bloodied, humiliated, dying, is not simply there in our place but for us and with us. Whatever else you believe about the cross of Christ the point is this, that God took the most horrific, the most violent, the worst that the world/humanity could offer and defeated it once and for all. All time. All people. He drove out the ruler of this world. Everything, I mean everything; even sin, evil, and suffering, is redefined in the image of God. Brothers and sisters, the day is surely coming. Our iniquity has been forgiven, our sins are remembered no more. The day is surely coming when each of us will know without doubt, when it will be written upon each of our hearts, that He is our God and we are His people! The day is, in fact, already here.

In Jesus Christ the promise has been kept!

Thanks be to our God.

Amen and amen.