

Covenant
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Romans 6:1-11

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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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.

Romans 6:1-11

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

The promises that the liturgist read this morning didn't come out of nowhere. There's history here. We've spent the last three weeks talking about the Ten Commandments, the agreement that God made with God's people right after bringing them out of slavery in Egypt. You remember, plagues, the sea parting, stone tablets, Charlton Heston playing Moses, that story.

At this point, that was six hundred years in the past. God has kept the covenant with the Hebrew people, but they have not done a good job of living up to that covenant. They have broken every one of those Ten Commandments, and trashed the spirit of them as well. After the

death of King Solomon, the kingdom split up into Northern and Southern kingdoms. The Northern kingdom of Israel has been conquered and the people taken off to exile by the Assyrian Empire.

King Jehoiakim of the southern kingdom of Judah is concerned about the Babylonian Empire doing the same thing to him and his kingdom. However, he's looking for support and protection in all the wrong places. He has paid tribute to Egypt and to Babylon, adopted their ways of life, and worshipped their idols. He has taxed the people in order to pay this tribute,¹ and he has allowed scoundrels to grow rich by exploiting the poor.² He has looked to all the empires around Judah for help, trying to play one off against another, but he has not looked for help to the God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Jacob.

Jeremiah is God's prophet in Judah. His job is to speak to the king and the people on God's behalf. He starts by telling the king that God has appointed him, Jeremiah, "over nations and empires, to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and to plant."³ He explains to the king, "You, sir, are in trouble." The king has not kept the covenant with God, and the people have not kept the covenant with God. The stone tablets on which the law was written might as well have been broken like the first set were. God is going to dig up and pull down, destroy and demolish Judah and all the empires around her.

God does, indeed, dig up and pull down. God does destroy and demolish. If they weren't mentioned in the Bible, then I'm convinced Assyria and Babylon would be about as well-known

¹ 2 Kings 23.

² Jeremiah 5:26-28.

³ Jeremiah 1:1-10.

today as the once-great cities of Karakorum⁴ and Hattusa.⁵ Familiar names that roll right off the tongue, right? In their time, they were just as great cities.

Today, Nineveh, the fabled capital of the Assyrian Empire, is a pile of ruins across the river from Mosul, Iraq. Babylon, too, once the most beautiful city in the world, is a ruin in Southern Iraq. There is not even a city near there today to help pinpoint its location. King Jehoiakim is barely a footnote in history as a disobedient and unsuccessful king of a conquered people.

God has seen that this covenant isn't working. So God comes up with a new plan. "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." This covenant won't be written on stone tablets that can be broken. This covenant will be written on the hearts of the people, and, though it doesn't say this explicitly, on God's heart as well.

God never intended to be some kind of a remote Divine Force, distant and impersonal. That has never been the kind of relationship God wanted to have with God's people. But some people have wanted the relationship to be that way. It was easier.

So God will make it clearer what God does want. God will go out of God's way to make sure that everyone understands that. God will live with the people. In John's Gospel it says that God has pitched his tent among the people, so that all of them might know God and God might know all the people.⁶

⁴ Genghis Khan's capital city in Mongolia.

⁵ Capital of the Hittite Empire. Located near the modern village of Boğazköy in north-central Turkey.

⁶ John 1:14

In this covenant, God's people don't look for ways to technically obey all God's commandments, while still finding ways to go ahead and hate their neighbor and cheat their friends.⁷ They don't look, because they know that the spirit of the law covers any loopholes. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and... love your neighbor as yourself."⁸

That means claiming God, and letting God claim you. That means loving God, and letting God love you. Giving God credit for the amazing good things God has put in your life. Things like the love of a young couple. Amazing things like a baby.

That means loving your white neighbor, and your black neighbor. And your Asian neighbor, and your Arab neighbor, and your Hispanic neighbor. Your professor neighbor, and your neighbor who is still learning enough English to get through a job interview. Genuinely wanting them to have what is best, just as much as you want yourself to have what is best.

That means loving your neighbor whose family came over on *The Mayflower*, and your neighbor whose family met the boat, and your neighbor who is a refugee. Genuinely caring about them and wanting them to be healthy and happy and to succeed.

And your Christian neighbor. And your Jewish neighbor. And your Muslim neighbor. And your atheist neighbor. And your neighbor of another religion. Not just wanting them to have what they need and what they want within reason, but being willing to do things to make that happen.

⁷ The allusion to Brian Potter and Dennis Lambert's anti-war protest song *One Tin Soldier* is intentional.

⁸ Matthew 22:27-29.

And your liberal neighbor. And your conservative neighbor. And your ex-con neighbor. And your disabled neighbor. And your straight neighbor. And your LGBTQ neighbor. All those people out there. They were all made in the image of God. And they're all your neighbors.

In this covenant, God's people are called to love their friends, the people who are easy to love, and who are nice to them. I'm sure we're all doing that already. But don't pat yourself on the back too hard – doing that doesn't make you special. Everybody does that.

God's people are also called to love their enemies, and to pray for people who persecute them.⁹ This is harder. And we're called to forgive other people who do bad things to us. That can be even harder.

This is being like God. God who loves even the people who hate God, and who loves the people who deny that God even exists. Like Jesus, who begged his Father to forgive the people who were killing him, literally as they were killing him.¹⁰

That is what it is to be God's people in the world.

But there's more. The other piece of being God's people in the world is that God will be our God. God will be present with us in good times and bad. God will be present when we feel like we have everything in our lives completely under control. God will be present with us when we feel like we should be the picture in the dictionary defining the term, "hot mess." God is with us today when we celebrate the baptism of a baby. God will be with us when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

God walks with us. God's comfort and God's healing and God's love go with us.

⁹ Matthew 5:43-48.

¹⁰ Luke 23:34.

Wherever we go.

God helps us to bring comfort and healing and love to those people around us who need it.

God knows that we won't love all those other people out there perfectly. God knows that we won't do a perfect job of forgiving them, when they do bad things.

And they will.

But you know what?

God still loves us.

God still "forgives [our] iniquity, and remember[s] [our] sin no more."

God still wants us to do better tomorrow than we did today. That's part of God loving us. That's God wanting what is best for us.

This is the covenant that we baptize Alyssa Diane into this morning.

We are asking the Almighty God, creator of Heaven and Earth, to place his mark on this little girl that God created beautiful. We are asking God to mark her as Christ's own, forever.

Because we are "convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate [her, or] us, from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹¹

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

¹¹ Romans 8:38-39.