

The New Covenant Foretold  
Fifth Sunday of Lent - Year B - 03/21/2021

Psalm Reading: 119:9-16

1<sup>st</sup> Reading: John 12:20-33, 2<sup>nd</sup>: Jeremiah 31:31-34

The prophet, Jeremiah, was known for his complaining, so much so that a long list of woes is often referred to as a Jeremiad. But Jeremiah did live in very troubled times. The state of Judah was under constant pressure by the Babylonians and he barely lived through the siege of Jerusalem in the century 500 years before Christ.

His words, recorded by his scribe, Baruch, are one of the major sources where we learn about much of the horrible destruction and privations that came upon that city. We learn of terrible privation and brutality within the city walls, even before the Babylonians came in.

But Jeremiah's most famous passages do not come from his catalog of woes, but from the times he rises above them. We can read in the book of Jeremiah messages of hope, and some very inspiring prophecies. In today's reading he predicts a time when all the suffering of the current age will come to an end, and the people of God will come to have a new relationship with God.

On our first Sunday of Lent, already a month ago, I had an opportunity to talk about the covenant that God made with Noah. Then God made a covenant with Abraham and later the Lord made a covenant through Moses that produced the Ten Commandments. In all of these, God ends up having a closer

and closer relationship with God's people and in every case, God is acting as savior to the people.

Noahic Covenant – Saved from Physical Destruction.  
(remnant)

Abrahamic Covenant – Promises the spread of humanity.

Ten Commandments – Saves us from each other.

Rules for society

(Old Testament) Testament = Covenant

*31 "The days are coming," declares the LORD,*

Forward Looking

Not dwelling on the depressing events of the present.

Hopeful message

God as a figure in History

The Bible as History – with God acting within it.

*"I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.*

God already has several covenants with the people.

Why does God need to make a new covenant?

Not about destroying the World because of sin.

People keep sinning.

Not about Multiplication of a particular people.

This is limiting

These are imposed from the top

There is something missing in these covenants.

Jeremiah's Prophecy, speaking the words of God speaks directly to the problem with the commandments. He says:

*32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt,*

The Ten Commandments are written in stone.

Permanent, Yes. But still missing something.

*because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.*

Talking about the letter of the Law not the Spirit

The people could not seem to obey the rules.

Steeped in sin.

The Ten commandments became just words:

To have no other Gods

To not worship idols.

To not take the name of the Lord in vain

To keep the sabbath day holy

To Honor Parents

To not murder

No Adultery

No steeling

Not answer falsely

Not Covet

What do you notice about this list of rules? All but two are about no...no...no! Important nos but even honor thy parents can be reframed as “do not dishonor your parents”, and the Third Commandment as “do not violate the Sabbath”. All these commands are passive, not active. How do we act out such a faith? It is restraining not expansive. It is impersonal. The Lord wants a personal relationship with humanity, but through the Old Covenant, and the people’s response to it, God just isn’t feeling it!

*33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel*

*after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.*

God is not tossing out the Old Testament. God’s promises are always kept. But here is a new agreement!

Not just an agreement but a promise!

A promise that will create a personal relationship!

Because of the way God goes about the New Covenant it is not about crime and punishment. It is about the love of God, and our response to that love which is our own love for God.

Not that God could not have done this from the beginning, but humanity had to grow, through successive covenants into the possibilities of the New Covenant.

God says:

*I will be their God, and they will be my people!*

At the end of our reading, verse 34 God says:

*34 “No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”*

So throughout this period of Lent, we are meant to recall our sinfulness, but also to remember that time before the New Covenant, when all was sin. As Paul notes in his letter to the Romans, we are convicted by the Old Testament (Rom. 6:23). For we weak humans it is impossible not to sin. If we were still living under that paradigm we would surely be condemned. Wasn’t that what the Noahic Covenant was all about, wasn’t it meant to be a solution for sin? It was the destruction of the world and yet it was not enough.

The Ten Commandments are God's rules etched in stone. This document was also meant as a solution for sin. God could not have been more clear and yet still there was sin. The relationship between God and people could not be rid of sin.

Because we ourselves could not do it, even with the Ten Commandments...Century after century we sinned...God again had to break into our history. It required a radical act. Yes, we still sin, and that sin condemns us. But God saves us through the cross. In the New Covenant, God sends Jesus Christ to wash us of our sins. Because God's son takes on the punishment that is due us, we can have a pure relationship through Jesus Christ. The rules are no longer simply etched onto a cold stone tablet, but engraved on our hearts. It is in recognition of this saving act that we endeavor not to sin, not because we fear punishment, but out of gratitude and love.

My friends, during this time of Lent let us remember what Christ suffered for our sake. Let us remember that this New Covenant we joyously embrace came at an infinite cost in suffering, and was done out of the greatest love of all by a God that wants a personal relationship with us.

ἀμήν