

MARCH 21, 2021

COVENANT

LENT V
FINDING RELIGION

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JEREMIAH 31:31-34

Well, we've made it to the last Sunday of Lent. This time last year, I don't think we imagined for a moment that we'd still be bearing the burden of COVID-19. It's been a long, hard year, full of anxiety and anger, loss and a lot of waiting. So maybe it's fitting that our text this morning is from Jeremiah, who is famously called the "weeping prophet." Most of Jeremiah's writings are coloured by sadness, anger, frustration and the necessity of waiting.

Jeremiah lived during a tumultuous, uncertain time. The kingdoms of God's people were fairly small, on a regional scale; Israel and Judah were not major political players. As Jeremiah began his career as a prophet, the world outside the borders of the two kingdoms was changing. Assyria, the empire that had for so long held sway over the Near East, was failing; Egypt and Babylon rose and began to fight over the territories of this crumbling empire and any unclaimed smaller kingdoms. In this tense and precarious situation, surely a word from God would be welcome; Jeremiah was an unpopular prophet...because he told the truth.

Throughout the Old Testament, there's a kind of repeating pattern. God does something amazing or gives some law for his people to follow so they can live holier lives. God makes promises to protect and bless and care for them, his ability to carry through demonstrated by some great act that had just happened. God's people make promises back: to follow God's lead, to trust God's care of them, and to worship and act as God intends them to. And it's all okay for a bit.

But then things start to go wrong again in the lives and hearts of God's people.

Next thing you know, it's abuse of the poor, failures to care for widows and foreigners, uneven distribution of wealth, a corrupt system of justice...and God's people turn away from God. This spread of sin and brokenness through their society always seems to start the same way, in the same place, every time. The spreading corruption of sin begins in the place where there should be no sin at all: the sin that leads God's people into exile began in worship.

Not really where we imagine sin taking root, is it; in the one place, the one window of time during the week when we imagine God's people as being closest to God. And yet, Jeremiah and other prophets in the Bible from this time period all lament and rage and warn and plead the same thing: God and God's Word are no longer at the heart of worship. And when the centre of their society rotted out, everything else began to collapse, too.

The people of God did not like to hear that their worship was flawed and false, and no longer a gift that God appreciated receiving from them. They did not want to change. Years before the last kingdom of God's people fell to Babylon, Jeremiah warned them that an enemy would come and that they would fall before it. No one wanted to hear that, either. In the end, what Jeremiah warned them about happened: all the political manoeuvring of Israel's kings, allying with some foreign powers, buying off others...it amounted to exactly nothing. They no longer worshipped God in any meaningful way, and the Word of God, in Scripture and through prophets like Jeremiah, no longer shaped and guided their actions or their thinking. God's people had drifted far from God; and God allowed them the independence to make their own choices and decisions, and to bear the consequences of those choices, too.

So the line of kings fell, Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple, the heart of their religion, reduced to rubble, and many of the people were taken away into distant Babylon, exiled from their promised land.

Do you think of yourself as a religious person?

The word "religion" has a lot of baggage attached to it, these days. Mostly when we hear religion, we think of denominations, of religious institutions and the organizational framework of polity and church law, doctrines and rules, maybe a hierarchy of courts or bishops. We think of the social history of religion, how it has used its power to act in the world. Some people, in an effort to shed all the rules and organization, who feel restricted by the required beliefs and practices of a religion, prefer to say that they are spiritual, not religious; a lot of well-meaning Christians say that they follow Jesus, not religion. Wherever we stand in relation to religion, we often default to understanding church as an organization, something that exists as an institution with a set of rules for us to support or reject in our communities and in our lives.

The word “religion” is a very old word, with blurry origins. We know it has roots in the Latin language, and that it predates Jesus and the founding of the Christian church; we also know that it was used more often in a secular setting – outside of any spiritual or supernatural belief system – to refer to things like morality and duty. These days, modern scholars of Christianity tend to emphasize how St. Augustine, one of the great early Christian thinkers, defined it. For Augustine, the concept of religion was rooted in the word ligo, meaning “bind, or connect”, and tacking on the prefix re- gave religion the definition of: to reconnect or bind together.

And that reconnection, that religion, is what God offers Israel again, in the midst of exile.

Right in the middle of God’s people living through the consequences of unmooring themselves from true worship of God, of rejecting God’s Word as the centre of their life together; after they have chosen to unbind themselves from God and God’s guiding power, right in the middle of Jeremiah’s lament and frustration: God speaks through his prophet to tell his people where he sees their relationship going:

“I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued in my faithfulness to you.
Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O Israel.”

And then God promises them a new covenant, a covenant that is deeply personal, made one-on-one between God with each of his people.

Before, the old covenants with Noah and Abraham and Moses, for those covenants, it was the people’s job to put those covenant laws from God in their hearts and minds, to be obedient and to form their lives around those laws. Now, God is going to write this new covenant on their hearts himself. It’s a new covenant founded – not on their obedience – but on God’s forgiveness. God is offering a new bond between them, a reconnection and restoration of the relationship between God and God’s people, but on new terms.

Remember that God’s law is all about helping them live in ways rooted in who God is and shaped by what God values; God’s law wanted to change who they were, and what they did.

But their worship had, for so long, been a hollow performance of a set of rules rather than genuine heart-deep response to God, given substance and depth by God's Word. So now God is offering them religion, reconnection with him under new terms: God will take the law from books and scrolls and tablets and write it in their hearts.

We still struggle with the same things today that God's people did, so long ago.

We confuse the religion and the relationship that God envisions between us and him with a rule-book. Rules can be something that makes us angry and resentful, or they can be something that gives us a lot of comfort and security. It's easy to struggle against the rules; on the other hand, it's easy to feel safe when we don't have to think too much about what to do.

But here, for us and for his exiled people, God imagines something more. It's like Jesus said, right at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:

“Don't think that I have come to do away
with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets.
I have not come to do away with them, but to fulfill them.
Remember that as long as heaven and earth last,
not the least point nor the smallest detail of the Law
will be done away with—not until the end of all things.”

And then Jesus proceeds to take all of the old laws, written in the Old Testament, and shows us how we'll think and act and feel when those laws are written on our hearts, when they're so sunk deep within us that we're not just following the law, we're changed by it.

Don't get me wrong, I'm with Jesus on this one: the law is good and it needs to be fulfilled, not done away with. The rules God gives are like signposts and warning signs, rumble strips and even crash barriers on our spiritual journey. They keep us on track, they help us to avoid a crash, and they give us a point of reference in unknown territory. God's law has always been intended to keep us with him, to be an expression of his love and care for us. The rules are the beginning of the truth; but if all we do is break the rules or follow the rules, what was made for our good can become an easy way to avoid or reject what God really wants for us: a change of heart and an unbreakable bond with him.

Speaking through Jeremiah, God unfolds a beautiful picture of what he imagines for that bond between us and him. It's not like a king and his subjects, or a leader and his subordinates; it's like a married couple.

God calls himself a husband to his people, to us, reformulating that bond into something like a marriage relationship in which every word spoken and action taken supports their partner and their life together.

What God is offering to us, what Jesus taught us about and enacted for us on the Cross, is a lasting, sturdy relationship of shared trust; a relationship in which we respond to God and God's Word in worship and work from the heart, and God accepts us freely with grace and forgiveness.

That's the new covenant, the one that God wants to write on our hearts, the covenant that God wants to root so deeply within us that each one of us is fundamentally changed from the inside out. God has always acted for us; and God's covenant bond is the finest example of that self-giving, put-your-loved-one-first kind of love. So there is one part of all this that has never changed. At the heart of all God's covenant promises, from Noah to Abraham, from Moses to Jeremiah to Jesus, is what has always been true: God has loved us with an everlasting love. That love is nothing new. Thanks be to God. Amen.