

11/24/24

“God Promises a New Covenant”

Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; 31:31-34

For one of my last doctoral classes we had to talk about something that we enjoy. And I could only think of one thing - words. I love words. I love to read. Some of my first memories are of climbing up beside my parents and having them read to me. Never just one books, but lots of books. Two of my nieces have inherited this love for words, and we have learned that unwinding and reading for bedtime never involves anything less than five books for them, which they will drag over as a pile at your feet.

But here's the thing about words - they weren't always written down in books. Our scripture from Jeremiah today starts off by stating that a word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. What do you think that it means to say a word came from the Lord to a prophet? Did it come in the mail? Or from something written down on a scroll? No. It came in a way that was clear to the prophet. Sometimes as voice. Sometimes as a movement of the Spirit. And the result is that Jeremiah knew exactly what he was supposed to do - write down for Israel all the ways that they have strayed from God and usher a call to repentance.

Ouch.

Not as easy task at all.

Yet, Jeremiah was faithful to the word of the Lord, and he took those words given to him and had them written down on scrolls for the people. Then those words were read in people's hearing so that they could sink into them.

But it didn't stop there. Those words found their way to the King, and they were read again in his presence. Only the King cut them up into little pieces and destroyed them. But God's word would not be stopped simply because the King had burned it up. Instead the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah again and told him to have it all written down again.

If you know the story of the prophet Jeremiah and the things leading up to these passage as well as what comes next, you know that it is a hard story to hear. It was even harder for Jeremiah to live through as a prophet. But shortly after this whole incident with the King - that same King is going to be taken away in chains. The temple is going to be destroyed. And the people are going to feel like God abandoned them, because they didn't let that Word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah, that Word that Jeremiah had written down and proclaimed. This Word of the Lord was written during a time of Israel's disobedience.

And all of a sudden, the Israelites, the people of God go into a tailspin. They start to think that God must be unfaithful - not realizing that it isn't God who broke faith, but them. God didn't fail - they had.

Now you may have noticed that I read the scripture a different way today. It doesn't happen often, but sometimes the lectionary, or the group of readings that we use on Sundays, come with special instructions. That was true this week. After the scriptures from Jeremiah 36 comes these words *then* Jeremiah 31: 31.

Odd. Why do you think that is? Because Jeremiah 31 talks about a different type of writing. A different place where words are placed - on the heart. But we can't understand why we need words to be written on our hearts if we can't understand where the hearts of the people are in the first place- which Jeremiah 36 shows us.

Jeremiah 31 is trying to tell the people of Israel that a time is coming when the covenant that they had been bound by, the covenant of the law, would have to change. Why? Because the people cannot live into it. Sure, they had tried. But they had failed because we cannot heal

ourselves of the sin in our lives and we have zero, hear me friends, zero chance of being perfect on our own. Hear that from me, a recovering perfectionist.

God is deeply disappointed in the people, yet God says that a new way, a new covenant is coming. One that isn't based on the people's ability to keep the law or their own goodness, but rather solely on the grace of God. And that is where hope resides.

So what does it mean to have the law written on our hearts? Well let's start with that word heart. It's not about having the law memorized. It's not about having all of the head knowledge in the world - its about letting it sink into us. The heart in the ancient world was thought to be the place where emotions and spirit resided. What made us who we are. So if the law is written on the people's hearts, its about having that law be so deeply a part of who they are that it is lived out in their lives.

Another way to say this is that it isn't about knowing about God, its about knowing God. Friends, there are a lot of people who know about God, but if is only about knowing about and not about loving then we've missed the point.

Take for example the King - he knew about God. In fact, he was believed to be appointed by God to lead the people. Yet, by cutting up the words and burning them in the fire he showed that he had no respect or love for God.

One of the things that I collect as a lover of words is letters. When ever someone takes the time to write me a letter, I treasure them. I cannot bring myself to throw them out. God wrote the people of Israel and their leader a letter and he destroyed - he destroyed the word of the Lord because it wasn't what he wanted to hear or receive.

This new law, this new covenant, that is going to be written on the heart - its the law of love. Not just any love, but love of God and love of neighbor. But here's the thing about love - we cannot trick ourselves into loving God by simply knowing facts about God. We cannot make ourselves love our neighbor just by knowing facts about them either. Love is more than that. Love is meant not to be believed, its meant to be lived.

So Jeremiah is essentially offering the people a new way of living. A new way marked by love. A way that they desperately needed. A way that we would eventually see embodied in Jesus Christ and his love for us that drove him the whole way to the cross. But love doesn't stay there, Church. We, as the hands and feet of Christ, *live* into that law of love today.

For the past several months I have been working on a discipleship project - deeply diving into God's Word with a group of ladies, talking every month around questions like this: Lord, who do you want me to love today? And Lord, how can I love you today? And what has struck me during that whole process is the thought - what would be different in our lives and in the world if we let God's love lead us? If we prayed for God to give us opportunities to love others? What could have been different in the lives of the people during Jeremiah's time? And what could be different in our world today?

I started this sermon by telling you that I am a lover of words, but no more so my friends than I love *the Word*. The Word made flesh. The one who I have given my life to. The one who has captured my heart. If we hold Jesus in our hearts, how are we sharing that love with our lives? Amen.