

**LENT V, 2018**  
**Jeremiah 31.31-34**

---

*This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel ... I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*

\*\*\*\*\*

This Lent we have followed the Old Testament readings and their focus on the covenants of the Bible. The concept of covenant is very important in the Bible. A covenant is a pledge, a promise of faithfulness. In making a covenant God binds Himself to His people, and His people to Himself. This is often expressed in the sentence, "I will be your God and you will be my people." There are mutual promises, obligations, and responsibilities.

The first covenant was God's promise to the world in the time of Noah. Then came the covenant God made with Abraham, through whom all the peoples of the world would be blessed. Two weeks ago we had the Sinai covenant, in which God made His people a kingdom of priests, a holy nation to serve His purposes.

Today's reading is from the prophet Jeremiah. He lived in the early years of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century before Christ. Jeremiah prophesied of a new covenant God promised to make with His people. It would be a new covenant, but in some ways the same covenant. God would forgive the sins of His people. The Jews would still be God's people, and God would still be their God. God would forgive His people their sins. Instead of writing down His Law on stones or in a book, God would do even better: He would write His Law right in their hearts, the center of their will and personality.

The Jews to whom Jeremiah spoke this prophecy of a new covenant knew their need for forgiveness. This text comes from a dark time in Jewish history: the destruction of their country and their exile in Babylon, 600 years before Jesus. The people saw little hope for their future. And, they were consumed by guilt over their past. They said to themselves, "We are in the situation we are in because we sinned against God. We did not walk in His ways. We did not live up to the expectations of the covenant God made with us. How can anything good happen in our future, how can God ever be

good to us again, given the sins we did against the Lord? "

To these people burdened with the memory of their past Jeremiah spoke of a new future filled with hope and a new start. Better days were coming, Jeremiah said, because God would forgive their sins and establish a new covenant with them. Not only forgive their sins but forget them as well! The new covenant would be an unbreakable covenant. God would be so close to His people that everyone would know from the heart what God wanted them to do and how God wanted them to live.

\*\*\*\*\*

Christians believe that in Christ this promise of a new, unbreakable covenant has been extended to any in the world who receive Christ in faith and are baptized in His Name. It is an unbreakable covenant because God has sealed it with His greatest act of love, the death and resurrection of Jesus. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says, the death of Christ ushered in the new covenant under which we are justified by God's grace and mercy. It is now possible for all people to have the true forgiveness of sins. Jesus Himself is the Mediator of this better covenant between God and man (Heb. 9:15). Jesus' sacrificial death served as the oath, or pledge, which God made to us to seal this new covenant.

We can experience the forgiveness of God who writes His teaching into our hearts in the Holy Supper of our Lord, His presence in bread and wine. In Christ God forgives our iniquities and remembers our sins no more. He forgives and forgets.

How much do we need to both receive and give forgiveness in our lives and relationships with others! Forgiveness promotes love, hope, compassion, trust, and acceptance. It frees us from seeing ourselves as victims of an unchanging fate or the actions of others.

Living in the power of God's forgiveness, we can find the power to forgive others, receive forgiveness from God and others, and know healing in our personal relationships.

\*\*\*\*\*

Some may say, "I can forgive, but I cannot forget." There is some truth to that; we tend to hold on to our memories. It is hard to trust others completely, once they have wounded us.

On the other hand, I do believe we forgive and forget more often than we realize. Think of your marriage. What would happen if you remembered all the sins your spouse has committed against you, even if you forgave him or her for them? How could your marriage survive? Indeed, could you say you really forgave the other person?

Parents forgive and forget a lot of their children's sins. I don't remember many of the sins of my children growing up. Nor do I want to. And, thankfully, they do not remember mine.

The same is true for a church. No congregation can be healthy if members keep a ledger of every fault or wrong done against them by their pastor or fellow members. Now almost forty years a pastor, I know I have to forgive and forget the sins church members have committed against me, or it will poison my life. It is far better to commit the past to God, to redeem it and use it for His purposes, and go forward in the freedom that His forgiveness gives.

(There is a website, "The Forgiveness Project," that has dozens of stories of incredible acts of forgiveness, and the healing power of forgiveness. Check it out.)

\*\*\*\*\*

Forgiveness is a uniquely biblical concept. It is rooted in the concept of guilt, while other ancient cultures operated with an ethic of honor and shame. Shame focuses on a person; guilt focuses on one's deeds.

Today we live in a culture that shames people. When someone does something wrong, when a person is found to have something undesirable in their past, they are publicly humiliated on television or through social media. They are trapped by their past.

The Bible introduced the possibility of forgiveness to the world. Because God forgives, we can be honest with Him and therefore with our-

selves. There is the possibility of repentance, confession, forgiveness, and making a new start. Our deeds do not condemn us to our past. We can repent, receive forgiveness, and change our lives for the better. This is the whole work of Lent: to take an honest look at ourselves, to admit where we have fallen short of God's Law, to make an accounting of all that keeps us from loving God and one another. Having done that, there is the possibility to repent and receive His forgiveness, so we can make a new start, filled with hope in a better future.

\*\*\*\*\*

Martin Luther was known for his dinner conversations, during which he would often opine on matters religious, political, and otherwise. One of the volumes in the collection of Luther's works is titled Table Talk, consisting of collections of things he said at the meal table. At one of his dinner conversations Luther is reported to have said, "All history moves toward the forgiveness of sins." Luther understood that human history is not, as modernity has believed, a story of continued progress, that things are getting better and better every day. You cannot remember the history of the last century and believe in progress. The human race does not outgrow its bondage to sin; it only develops more sophisticated ways of sinning and doing evil. And try as we might otherwise, in our personal lives we experience broken relationships and personal shortcomings. So in the end, we all stand in need of forgiveness: to give it, to do it.

But: "All history moves toward the forgiveness of sins." What a happy thought.

What good news it is, that our destiny is not judgment, but forgiveness! What good news it is, that at the end of the day God does not remember us for our shortcomings, but His banner over us is love, for the sake of Jesus Christ!

What good news it is that, when you add up the sum total of your life, the final accounting will not be your failures, nor even your successes, but the merits of your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

What good news it is, that the last word on your life is not: "You did this wrong..." but, "I forgive you, for Jesus' sake." Amen.