

A few weeks ago my preaching text was on Noah's ark and God's covenant or promise with the people, with all of creation, actually. I tried to distinguish between the different kinds of covenants. Most notably, the difference between God's covenant with Abram, and the one with Moses and the Israelites. In the case of Abram, it was a one-way promise. God made a divine commitment; there was no stated expectation in return. In the Mosaic covenant, the one with Moses and the Israelites, there, indeed, was an expectation in return. There was a human obligation to respond to God's goodness by keeping God's commandments, by loving God and one another in the community.

Covenants in the Old Testament were not like modern agreements or contracts which involve negotiations, often times with a lawyer or mediator. In these ancient covenants, the parties were not equal. Instead, one party was much more powerful than the other. In our case, no surprise, God was the more powerful party and the people were the weaker party. There was no room for negotiation, nor any requirement for the weaker part to consent or agree.

In today's reading from Jeremiah, we're told that there will be a new covenant between God and the people. But first Jeremiah, the Prophet, reminds the people that they failed at keeping the last covenant. Verse 32 – "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." This was not the first covenant with God people would break, nor would it be the last. From the very beginning humanity has fallen short of their promises with God. In today's text the prophet takes a rather radical position. Instead of God making an external covenant with Israel through stone tablets, through laws or even the rainbow in the sky, God's covenant would now be made internally. God would put the contents of the covenant into each human heart. Retired UCC pastor, Curt Anderson, wrote that as a result, "there would be no more necessity to teach the way of faithfulness, because people would already know it." [quote reference unknown] The law, the people's faithfulness, would be written on their hearts. People would be obedient, caring, forgiving, humble. The way of faithfulness and love would be their normal way of behaving. No longer will people need to learn about God, but, instead, people will know God. There will no longer be a need for stone tablets to remind us of the law and right behavior. It will all be right here, written on our hearts.

In our culture the heart is often thought to be the center of our emotional life, our feelings. In the western world anyway, the heart is often thought to be a poor guide for making decisions. To be led by the heart and not by the head may be thought of as being too emotional or romantic, rather than reasonable. In biblical times the heart was understood as the "central and unifying organ of personal life." Intellect, will, morality, and emotions were centered in the heart. For God's law to be "written" on the heart, then, meant fully incorporating our relationship with God into your physical, emotional, intellectual, and, even, our moral lives. It may be helpful to read today's text in light of an earlier text from chapter 11, which expresses God's distress over the breaking of the original covenant. "The people have turned back to the sins of their ancestors of old, who refused to heed my words; they have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant that I made with their ancestors." This led to destruction and exile. And now 20 chapters later, Jeremiah writes about a new covenant, but on their hearts. God will transform them from the inside out. Attempts at transforming them from the outside in had not been successful. With this new covenant their sinful past will be forgotten and they will be reunited with God in a new covenant relationship of devotion and gratitude, as well as obedience. One can argue that in Jeremiah 31, the newness is not that the covenant is to be written on the heart, but that who will do the writing. God isn't working through Moses, or Noah, or Abram, or Adam and Eve, for that matter. God goes directly to the people. This suggests that people are directly responsible to God, and God is directly responsible to people. God desires

relationship. Perhaps writing it on their hearts will bring relationship and faithfulness more to the forefront than stone tablets did for their ancestors.

The great reformer, John Calvin, stressed the importance of the entire breadth of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation; he didn't single out one part as being more important than any other to understanding all of Salvation History, and God's relationship with people. Jeremiah was an Old Testament prophet, someone who warned the people of what could happen if they were disobedient to God, someone who proclaimed God's will and word. A prophet was not a future predictor or a soothsayer. Jeremiah would not have known about Jesus Christ. The people of his day would understand "covenant" language, and his pronouncement of God's New Covenant. That being said, Calvin also noted that as post-resurrection people, we can't help but look at the Old Testament through Christian spectacles.

Here we are deep in the Season of Lent. In fact next Sunday will be Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which we know as Palm Sunday. It's hard for us to read about God's New Covenant without thinking of Christ as the new covenant. Old Testament scholar John Bright wrote: "So we must go beyond Jeremiah's word. We must follow Jeremiah's word ahead to the gospel, for it is to the gospel that it points us and drives us; and until it has driven us there it has not discharged its function. We hear Jeremiah's word, ...I will make a new covenant... - and that is promise. We also hear the gospel word, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood' - and that is fulfillment." [I don't have site for this quote]. The promise was made with Jeremiah and would be fulfilled with Jesus Christ.

God has already written the new covenant on your hearts. I believe my job today is to remind you of that. All the tools you need to live a faithful life, you've already been given, because God has written them on your hearts. We have been set free by the new covenant that was promised to Jeremiah's community, and now fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

The God who put the bow in the sky, who called Abraham and Sarah to a promised land, who gave Israel the law on stone tablets, who wrote the new covenant on our very hearts, and who we know as our Savior Jesus Christ, has never given up on us. What we see in Jeremiah, is a people struggling to understand the nature of God amidst the struggles in their own lives. The image of God writing someone on our own hearts, is the sign of a God who cares for us as individuals, not just as part of a community. This is a picture of a God who wants to be in a relationship with us, where we know God and God knows us, where the ways of God's love are written on our hearts by our God who has written our names on God's own heart. Amen.