

Nov. 12, 2017

Lesson 11: Promise of a New Covenant

Scripture: Jeremiah 31: 27-34

Context:

The scripture lesson today jumps to the Book of Jeremiah, a prophet known during the time of exile in the history of the Israelites. Most scholars point this book coming from the time of King Josiah (639-606 B.C.),¹ In the course of Josiah's reforms and untimely death, chaos begin to erupt as the Babylonians invaded the city once in 589 B.C. and then took the city of Jerusalem again in 587 B.C.² As the city was burned, the nobles and remaining leading citizens were deported to Babylon, leaving many behind including Jeremiah who was singled out for his prophetic preaching and call to surrender in the midst of the rebellion.³ Through his time there, Jeremiah stayed to preach and help lead the people when there seemed to be no hope.

Today's lesson comes from a section in which there is a promise of restoration for Israel. The themes of return and restoration to a full national existence provide several chapters filled with hope that Israel would become a nation once again free from foreign rule.⁴ Most of the four chapters (spanning chapter thirty through chapter thirty-four) are written in a different prose than the rest of Isaiah, meaning that different prophets and scribes continued to uplift the Israelite community in that time.⁵ As they were scattered to places like Babylon and Egypt, there was a disconnect from the very land that they called home and the people they knew. Hope was what was needed in the community and God used the prophets and scribes to convey those words.

The first part of chapter thirty-one follows the return to Zion, the place that was home and given to the Israelites. Like the love of the matriarch Rachel to her children, God will continue to nourish and provide for the Israelites. As they do so, they will flourish. People and animals will spring up like seeds and the people will be renewed. No longer will the belief hold that they "pay for the sins of the parents" like sour grapes leaving a bitter taste in the mouth. Instead, there will be a new covenant unlike the one made with the Israelites upon the escape from Egypt.

In this new covenant, God will give them the knowledge to know that they are children of God and that they are forgiven. God's favor will not be dependent on their "keeping the law" as God will not keep a tally mark of their sins. They will be renewed as they will be God's people regardless of what sins they commit. There is hope for the people and a time to not focus on the sins of their parents or their own sins. There is a new day in front of them, shining with hope.

Application:

This passage is one that I think is at the core of who we are as Christians. God is

¹ R.E. Clements, "Jeremiah," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1988), 4.

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid., 5.

⁴ Ibid., 175.

⁵ Ibid., 176.

always hopeful and faithful, even when we many not be. If you pay attention to the surrounding chapters of this passage and even listen to the subtext of what is written, there is a lot of despair about the future because of what has happened in the past. There was an assumption that past wrongs or sins meant that God was punishing the Israelites and had completely given up on them as they were invaded and then scattered across the land. Sadly, the people have fallen into despair so much so that they don't see hope as a possibility.

As a pastor, I sometimes have people who read a certain passage or have done something and come to me believing that their current predicament is because of something they've done. There is a belief that somehow God is punishing them or will punish their children. My question to them is why they think so. What follows is a theology rooted in fear of God and a belief that somehow we can earn our worth as a Christian by checking off boxes.

What a scary way to live! Always on edge about what we are to do and thinking that God is out to get us when we mess up. And that our children and grandchildren will be the victims of said sins as well. Usually the conversation ends with a conversation about how many times scripture says: "Do not fear," and a prayer that God will show us hope even in the midst of despair.

The scripture passage reminds us of the fact that God gives us what we need to know that our God isn't in the business of not forgiving us or punishing us for our sins. Instead, God gives us a new heart and maybe even new eyes to see how God is at work even in the pain. The times that are the most hopeless are usually when God does the most creative work and even speaks into those situations as not giving up on us. Instead, we find different gifts and have new perspectives that help us become better disciples.

The best part of it all is that it is deeply personal. The words from the writing speak of each person knowing God intimately, not as just a distant god who rules over the nation. Instead God will know them intimately and love each one of them individually. God does the same with us, knowing our imperfections and still deeply loves us. What sins or past mistakes do you need to let go of and be reminded that you are God's chosen one? Because God is in love with you and will not see you for your sins or mistakes, but as a child that will never be let go.

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