

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.

And so we come this morning, at last, some might say, to the end of our seven weeks with Jeremiah, and I'm pleased to say that despite much of his book being gloomy, we leave him on a high. One of the strange distinctive features of Jeremiah is that he spends most of the book warning the people that something terrible will happen, that the city of Jerusalem is going to fall. When it does happen he never once says, "I told you so." But, instead he switches gear, and goes from being a prophet of doom to offering great words of hope like the reading we had today.

If you remember from last week if you were here, the Babylonian army invaded Jerusalem, and the people of Israel overran them, and took the leaders, and the significant, the court all went off into exile, into Babylon, which we now call Iraq. The context for today's reading is Jeremiah, you remember was left behind with the "also rans" in Jerusalem, and these words that we have recorded today are from when he was walking amongst the rubble strewn streets of Jerusalem after the decimation of that city. As he goes around, he has a profound insight about God's future dealings with his people.

Jeremiah is the only person in the Old Testament who speaks of a new covenant between God and his people. Covenant is an idea which is there throughout the Old Testament, but here we see a hint, a prophecy of a new covenant. "The days are surely coming." Says the Lord, "... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel." It would be 600 years before that message of which Jeremiah speaks would be fully understood with the coming of Jesus, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but Jeremiah was the first to point to this new coming reality.

Before I get into detail about what Jeremiah's saying here, I just want to say something general about the notion of covenants, which as I've said, is one of the most important words in the Bible that

runs throughout the whole of the Jewish scriptures, and it's no exaggeration to say that the notion of covenant is one of those things which holds those scriptures together, and I know that covenant is a word that is used over here, but it seems to be largely used in neighborhoods to describe how high you can grow your hedge, or what color you can paint your front door. In biblical times, the notion of covenant is a much deeper, richer notion, and it's not specific just to the people of Israel in the Bible.

The word covenant is a word that we see used throughout the ancient Near East. It appears in various vassals and treaties that are drawn up, and a covenant is an agreement made between two parties, and there's always a sense of you do this, and then, I'll do that in return. A covenant is always a transactional relationship, and this was the word that the biblical writers used to describe the relationship between God and the people of Israel. They were in covenant together beginning with Abraham, and then, the notion is developed over the years coming to a climax with the covenant God made with Moses that was sealed on Sinai with the giving of the Ten Commandments.

Israel would be God's people, and he would be their God. That was under all the various guises the covenant emerge. That was always the punchline. "I will be your God, and you will be my people." And, much of the Old Testament is concerned with laying out the terms of the covenant. We heard in a adult forum today that there were 613 commandments, not just the 10 for the people of Israel to fulfill if they were going to keep their side of the covenant, and the sacrificial system that we read in the books of Leviticus and elsewhere is about what they need to do for the covenant, and the prophets when they come along, much of their messages, "You're not keeping the covenant. You're not doing your part. You've got to do better to fulfill the covenant that God has made with his people."

The unique element of Jeremiah's message that we see here is the promise of a new covenant, which is

in some ways like the old covenant, but also, radically different, and let me pick out two ways that the new covenant is different, and to be distinguished from the old. First, the new covenant that God makes with his people will be written on the hearts of the people. God says, "I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts." What was the old covenant written on? Tablets of stone. The law came to Moses on Mount Sinai on two tablets of stone.

But, there will come a time Jeremiah saw when the law will be written on their hearts, when knowing God won't be a matter of keeping 10, 613 or whatever religious laws. Instead, it will be an affair of the heart. Jeremiah starts to see God relating to people in a more intimate, personal way, so it's not so much knowing about God that matters, but knowing God, being drawn into that relationship with God, that affair of the heart, knowing God in a more personal way. St. Paul writes this, "Who knew of that new covenant, who spoke of the fulfillment of the promise that Jeremiah saw. Hope does not disappoint us... " He says, "... because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

St. Paul knew he was one under the new covenant where his religion wasn't about following the laws. That's what he knew he'd been freed from in Christ Jesus. He went from the need to follow the laws to knowing the God who poured his love into his heart. We had an inquiry this week from a wedding couple who said they were getting married in La Jolla, and they'd like to use the church as a backdrop. They didn't actually want to come into the church to get married. They certainly didn't want a priest involved, but what they would like, and at this I'm being very, very serious now, what they would like is to have the ceremony on the steps outside so that the church was there in the photographs as a backdrop to their marriage.

Now, as I heard that you can imagine there were a number of thoughts going through my mind. One of them was that there's a great illustration there of the difference between the old covenant and

the new covenant. The old covenant wants to stay outside on the steps, and have faith as a kind of backdrop to our lives. The new covenant that God calls us into that Jeremiah knew was coming was something about come inside. Faith isn't just a backdrop, it's written on our hearts. It's not knowing about God, it's knowing God. It's being in that relationship.

I'm glad something good came out of that ridiculous inquiry, and there was no offer of payment either, but that wasn't the moment at which I said no. This passage from Jeremiah is structured in a very interesting way. There's a little phrase that comes three times, and actually it's easy to overlook it, because it's not translated in a very good or literal way, but three times we hear. "Says the Lord." And, that phrase is much more accurately translated the whisper of God, God's whisper. It reminded me of a woman I met once who had a cleft palate, and it was a scar which had dominated her childhood, and she was always teased about it, and it made her feel unloved, and an outsider, and unwanted, like kids do, don't like to be different, and if she was asked about it, she'd always say it was an accident. She hated to say she was born that way.

She had this wonderful teacher early on, and, you know, we all have those teachers who we love, and the whole class loves, and whatever they do is just great. This teacher used to do occasional hearing tests of the class, and on one afternoon the class had to cover one ear, and the teacher went round whispering in their uncovered ear, and they had to repeat back the phrase the teacher was whispering in their ear, and she would say things like, "The rain in Spain." Or, "Mary had a little lamb." She got to this girl, and she whispered in her ear, "I wish you were my little girl." This girl, as a grown woman she said that was just one of those transformative moments in her life. For whatever reason, the teacher knew just what to say, and her confidence built, and she would still call that a defining moment in her life, the whisper of God.

That's what Jeremiah is talking about, a reference to the quiet, intimate or authoritative communication from God. That's what Jeremiah is pointing to here. He's saying, "Gone are the days when God will bellow down from on high, or speak from a cloud, or shout to Moses from a distance. He's going to whisper quietly to all of his people." God gives us the gift of His Spirit. He dwells within us by His Spirit. God in this new covenant draws close, dwells within us, writes on our heart. He ministers quietly to us. Are we listening?

The second characteristic of this new covenant that I'll pick out is that it's written...well, initiated by God. "I will write it on their hearts." It says. WE don't bring this new covenant into effect, God does. The book of Hebrews in the New Testament talks about Jesus being the mediator of the new covenant, and Jesus himself uses this language, and we'll hear it later in our Eucharistic Liturgy. You listen out for the words where we say what Jesus says, "Drink this all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you, and for many, for the forgiveness of sins." We don't earn our forgiveness, it comes as a gift. God writes the covenant in our hearts. One could say that the religion of the old covenant was spelled D-O. It was all about keeping the laws, doing the right thing. What mattered was what you do.

But, the new covenant of faith made in Christ Jesus is spelled D-O-N-E. It's all about what God and Christ has done for us in giving us peace and forgiveness through his death and resurrection. Our reading ends, "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." Which is the Bible's only reference to God forgetting anything. Jesus Christ is the mediator of a new covenant. He has one for all people, the hope of forgiveness, and the promise of a clean slate. There's nothing we can do to earn that promise. It comes as God's gift under the terms of the new covenant made in Jesus Christ. The call on us is to receive that gift and to respond.

We respond not out of a sense of obligation, but out of gratitude, and, of course, on this day when

we kick off our stewardship drive I'm bound to say that one aspect of this response is what we do with our money. I encourage you to consider prayerfully the letter, which I hope you've all received about the campaign this year, which we'll be hearing more about later. Let's not simply offer God a tip, because Jesus himself said, "Freely you have received, freely give."

As we finally move on from our time with Jeremiah, he's leaving us with a great promise. We are all included in God's new covenant. We are the people who know God, whose sins are forgiven, and whose hearts are inscribed by God. Amen.