

Sermon – March 21, 2021  
“A New Covenant”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry on this mission field. Amen*

Good morning! I trust that all are doing well and that everyone was able to enjoy the BBQ dinner at Fairfields yesterday. Thank you to Fred and Carol and also to all of the workers at the yard sale. It was great to see people out on a nice sunny day. Welcome also to the first day of Spring! Before we look at this morning's scripture, I want to offer up a time to share for anyone who is reading one or more of the Gospels and would like to share with us this morning something they have encountered Jesus speaking to them as they have listened to his voice. Would anyone like to share this morning? Let me encourage us either to keep reading the Gospel we have started or to begin one today. We are coming to the end of Lent with Palm Sunday next week, followed by Holy Week, and then Easter the following Sunday. These coming two weeks are a great time to read through a Gospel and linger in the closing chapters, listening for Jesus' words for us. I am currently reading Luke's Gospel, and as I read this past week, marked Jesus' words, then spoke them aloud and listened, I encountered Luke 8:15. This is the ending verse in Jesus' teaching about sowing seed in soil. Jesus ends the parable with words about what is sown in good soil, "But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance." I had been trying to hear Jesus' words all week and had not really encountered words where I thought the Holy Spirit was leading me to hear something new. However, as I read chapter 8, my focus was led to the last part of this verse, "hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patient endurance." I hope in our lives we have all encountered people who have extravagantly loved us. They are those from whom we have received unusually deep love in our lives. If we think long about people who have loved us, we can all recognize such people who stand out in our life memories. This verse helped me understand the source of their extravagant love. It is from the seed held in their hearts that brought forth fruit and was given to us. As Christians, we are all

seeking to be like them, and to learn to hold the seed, the word of God, in our own transformed hearts that have been made honest and good by Christ. Let me challenge you sometime today, not during the sermon, to recall those who stand out as people who loved you extravagantly and see if you think the source of that love might be the word of God held fast in an honest and good heart. Let me encourage us all to continue to read one of the Gospels and listen for Jesus to speak to us through his words, and then come and share with each other what we encounter.

Let's move now to today's scripture. Jeremiah is sharing the words of God that have been given to him with the people of Israel and Judah. The focus on both of these groups points to the inclusion of all people in the coming new covenant he speaks to. This text in Jeremiah is the only place in the Old Testament in which a reference to a new covenant is found. I think to better understand the idea of a new covenant, we need to understand what covenants meant in the Ancient Middle East. Let me thank Sandra Richter for her teaching on covenant relationships in the Ancient Middle East and Old Testament.

In a modern view, a covenant is similar to a contract between two parties, such as a contract to purchase a home. We have written terms, stipulations, that speak to what each party will do. One pays and gets the home, and the other leaves the home and receives the money. These types of contracts are between two equal parties. In the Ancient Middle East, covenants were also made between parties of equal status to conduct business, but covenants were also made between two parties, one the weaker and the other the stronger, for other reasons. In the time of the Old Testament, this type of covenant would often be an agreement between a small city kingdom (say, a city in the land of Canaan) and a large super power in the area (say, Egypt). The small city kingdom would enter into a covenant with Egypt for protection. If they were attacked, they could then appeal to Egypt for help and Egypt would be required to send troops to defend them. The small city kingdom, in turn, would agree to pay Egypt tribute and to send troops to support Egypt in their wars as needed. The covenant was put in place by those representing the parties in the covenant gathering together, writing down the stipulations of the covenant, killing an animal, and cutting the carcass in half. Those making the covenant would then walk through the halves. This is cutting the covenant. They are saying to each other, if I fail to meet the stipulations of the covenant, you can make me like this animal. The parties making the covenant would each receive a copy of the covenant, take it home, store it in the temple of their god, and pull it out, and read it to everyone on some regular basis.

At Mt. Sinai, we may recall, God came to the people of Israel to make a covenant with them. Moses went up on the mountain and received the ten commandments written on a tablet of stone. And you may recall that when Moses came down the mountain, he had two tablets, Israel's copy and God's, as God does not need a copy. Moses put the tablets in the ark of the covenant and put the ark in the tabernacle, the temple of Israel's God. These ten commandments were the stipulations of the covenant, what each party had agreed to do. God agreed to watch over Israel for good and Israel agreed to keep the stipulations of the covenant. You also may remember that Moses sacrificed bulls and took half the blood and dashed it on the people. Covenants are made with the shedding of blood. And Israel had agreed that if they broke the covenant, God could make them like the bull that was sacrificed, whose blood was sprinkled on them.

Now I need to give you a spoiler alert. If you have not read the Old Testament, you may not know that God is faithful to this covenant. The one who watches over Israel slumbers not nor sleeps. God is faithful, always extending his steadfast love. The people of Israel, like us today, and as Jerimiah reminds them in this scripture, are not faithful to the covenant. The northern kingdom has gone into exile, and the southern kingdom will also soon go into exile as punishment for breaking the covenant again and again. The stipulations of the covenant have been broken and from the sound of Jeremiah's words, unless Judah repents, they are also about to be dealt with for their failure to keep the stipulations of the covenant. Yet, in the midst of Jeremiah's prophetic warnings to Judah, he adds something unexpected from God. He speaks to a new covenant, one that will not be like the first with its stipulations written on stone tablets and stored out of sight in the holy of holies in the ark in the tabernacle. It will be a new covenant for Israel and Judah, a covenant for all people. This covenant will also be written on the hearts of God's people. And with this new covenant, God will once again be their God, and those with the law in their hearts will be able to keep the stipulations of the covenant and be God's people. Jeremiah's words must have seemed a great mystery to faithless Judah and Israel. Jeremiah's call to Judah to return to God does go unheeded and the people are taken into exile to Babylon.

Now let's jump forward to a new time in Israel's history, a time when the people of Israel have been taken over by Rome and are crying out to God under the difficulties of Roman rule. Let's go to an upper room on the night of the Passover feast when the Passover lamb is scarified and consumed. It is a night when the people of Israel remember that many years ago

God had acted on their behalf, and, with the blood of a lamb spread on the doorposts and lintel of their house, the angel of death had passed over their homes. The angel of death did not come into their homes. Instead, God smote all the firstborn of Egypt and then led Israel out into the wilderness to enter into a covenant with Him at Mt. Sinai. Those gathered in the upper room with Jesus have celebrated the meal with all of its reminders of God's action on their behalf, and just before the normal ending to the meal, Jesus does something unexpected. Listen to these words from Luke 22: 17-20, "Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'" These are the words we hear in our Communion service. This is our reminder of what Jesus has done to make a new covenant. He will go forward to the cross to shed his blood and die to put this new covenant in place. He will be the perfect sacrifice needed for our sins to be taken away, for the stipulations of the new covenant to be written on our hearts in our bodies as temples of God, and for us to be empowered to keep those words. The stipulations of the new covenant are to keep Jesus' command to "love one another." Jesus is resurrected, ascends to heaven, and waits at the right hand of God the Father to come again in power. The Holy Spirit is sent to us and God's Law is written not on stone tablets but on the hearts of those who believe in Jesus and accept him as their savior. We enter into this covenant through belief in Jesus. Baptism is where we publicly in a community of believers enter this new covenant and receive the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the Spirit that leads us into all truth and enables us to love one another. We don't need to bring out the stipulations of this new covenant and read them. When we have Communion with Jesus, we are reminded of his love and are sustained in the new covenant through Jesus' shed blood by which our iniquities are forgiven and from which point forward no more will God remember our sin.

This is the new covenant we now live under; yet we still look forward to its complete fulfillment at some future moment. We look forward to the new covenant's complete institution when Jesus returns in power to rule and reign forever. During the season of Lent, we have focused on our need for repentance and forgiveness as we also are people, even with the Law

written on our hearts and not on stone tablets, who are those who struggle with our sin nature. In the coming weeks, we will remember Jesus' gift to us that again allows God to be our God and for us to be the people of God. Let me close this morning by encouraging us to take time to read the closing chapters of a Gospel and to experience what Jesus does to establish this new covenant. Take time to follow Jesus up Calvary, to the cross, to the tomb, to the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning and Jesus' appearance to the disciples as a resurrected savior, the first born of the dead. And as we follow Jesus, let us seek to understand more clearly what it means to be people of the new covenant and to hold this seed, God's word, in a good and honest heart and to yield the fruit of love with patient endurance.

*Pray with me: Abba Father, I desire to be part of a new covenant with you. Come and write on my heart the stipulations of your new covenant, and then empower me to live as one whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are remembered no more. Guide me into a fresh encounter with your new covenant through your son Jesus Christ and teach me to bear fruit with patient endurance. Amen.*