

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.18.2018



## The Promise of Belonging

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 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, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

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*O Lord, you have searched us and known us. You discern our thoughts from far away. Knowing us as we are, you’ve loved us anyway. May we hear your word in scripture and know that you accept us as we are. May we hear your word in scripture and know that you call us to grow beyond what we presently are. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

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I’m going to count to three...and you better be down here before I get there.

One...

Two...

Three...

...

Four...



Five...

Six...

Or, maybe you've heard it this way...

You may freely eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it, you shall die.

And after they ate, the Lord sewed garments of skin for the man and the woman, and clothed them as they left the garden.

Cain said to his brother, Abel, "let us go into the field." And he rose against him. And Abel's blood cried out from the ground. "Where is your brother?" God asked. And Cain said, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

So God put a mark on Cain so that he would be protected.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth and that every inclination of their hearts was evil continually, and the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind, and it grieved his heart.

So the Lord made a promise to Noah – and after rescuing him – said "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease."

And then the whole earth had one language and the same words – and the people said, "come, let us build a city with its top in the heavens...and let us make a name for ourselves!"

So God scattered them across the face of the earth...except God made a promise to an ancestor of those who were gathered at Babel...to Abram – soon to be Abraham: "I will make of you a great nation, and will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

And that's just the first twelve chapters of the first book of the story that tells about the relentless love of God who makes promises or offers provision or protection even after we break God's heart...only to do it again, and again, and again.

I didn't even get to Moses and the Ten Commandments, which the people violated before he could get down the mountain with the tablets in his hand.

I didn't get to David and his promised kingdom, which he put at risk because he couldn't keep his eyes off of Bathsheba.

I didn't get to Peter – the rock upon which Jesus would found the church – who denied his Christ three times.

Or to the rest of the disciples to whom Jesus entrusted the keys of the kingdom, and who locked themselves in a room after the crucifixion



because they were afraid.

The pattern continues – all the way through these pages – God loves, God promises, God calls us to be faithful, we fall short...God still loves, God reissues the promise, God calls us to be faithful.

One...

Two...

Three...

...

Four...

Five...

Six...

+ + +

The prophet Jeremiah speaks because God's people have done it again.

They have established themselves in the land of milk and honey which God promised and delivered to them.

They have organized themselves under a kingship which they begged for – and that God delivered.

They have an identity as God's people – blessed to be a blessing – and they've squandered it.

They fail to do justice.

They fail to love kindness.

They fail to walk humbly with their God.

Jeremiah writes to those people who now face an unimaginable tragedy. Jerusalem – the city of peace – their capital – has been overrun by their enemy, the Babylonians. Their temple has been laid to ruin. And much of the Jewish nation has been carted off out of their native land into exile – deep into Babylonian territory – far from home.

Jeremiah the prophet does what you might imagine a prophet would do: he lets the people have it.

I don't know if you know the word, jeremiad. A jeremiad is a form of rhetoric that lays the misfortunes of the day at the feet of the people on account of their sins – either personal or societal. The logic goes: this is what we did wrong. This is what we are getting because of those things.



In our culture, just turn on the television after something goes wrong – you’ll hear an example of the jeremiad. Someone will tell you whose sins are to blame for the ills that have befallen us.

Essentially, a jeremiad is a fancy word for “you are getting what you deserve.” And, as you may have guessed, the etymology of jeremiad is a spin on the name of the prophet Jeremiah whose book in the Bible has nearly 52 chapters’ worth of a jeremiad to share.

Jeremiah said things like:

*I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals, and I will make the towns of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.*

And like:

*Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the North and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace.*

I believe at some point I have shared with you that at my last church we had a weekly service of midday prayer on Wednesdays. A small group of the faithful would gather to pray, to sing, and to read scripture together. We decided we would pick a book of the Bible and read one chapter a week – straight through. We started with Jeremiah – 52 chapters, 52 weeks. Perfect!

I guess it was around the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> week that the good folks in Louisiana started wishing that Jeremiah, like his predecessor Samuel, had lived in a time when the word of God was rare and visions were not widespread. But Jeremiah didn’t live in that time. He kept it up.

After almost 31 chapters of jeremiads; 31 chapters of “you are getting what you deserve,” the tone suddenly shifts:

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with my people. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors...a covenant that they broke. But this is the covenant that I will make: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

Why would Jeremiah relay **this** message?

Had he lost his mind?

Had the old, crusty prophet finally lost his nerve?

No.

Jeremiah interrupted his jeremiad to reveal the true nature and character of God-



who, even in the face of large-scale disobedience and unfaithfulness – will not give up on the people whom he loves.

A God whose love is so sure, and so fierce, that it can stretch beyond a covenant which has been broken, discounted, ignored – to create a new one – this time, a covenant that is written on the people’s hearts.

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One of the most powerful things about this library of 66 books that we believe to be holy Scripture is that they don’t just tell a story about history – about other people in days gone by – but, in fact, we believe that what makes this book Scripture is that it describes the way things are. And will be.

It’s not so much that we read the Scripture.

It is that when we open these pages, and really pay attention, the Scripture reads us.

“We are all caught in cycles from which we want to be freed – an addiction, an alienation, a hurt, an argument, a guilt, a habit that goes on and on.

We find ourselves stuck in patterns that lead us to away from, and then back to, choices that we wish would stop making.”

We wish for a way out.

We yearn for a way out.

But we either cant find it, or we discover that the cost is too high.

I had a teacher once who said that the problem with our patterns is that they leave a mark – a legacy – that can feel irreversible. “We make gesture, speak a word, take an action. We may do it maliciously or carelessly. In either case, that word or gesture or action creates misunderstanding, distrust, hostility, alienation, and we live with it forever. There is no way out. Things grow more and more abrasive, until alienations are deep and the hurt is beyond measure.”

You, like me, probably know families where a harsh word spoken years before continues to alienate. Where a marriage stays frozen. Where parents and children are at deep odds.

The same thing happens between communities – and nations – and civilizations.

We ache for a chance to start again.

We yearn for the pattern to be different.

But it costs too much – and we don’t know how to break the cycle.

The Bible knows something about that – and the Bible says something about that.



This week, from a colleague, I read about their visit to a family reunion. A cousin brought greetings from a favorite uncle. The uncle was in the far stages of dementia and was living in a long-term care facility and was not able to attend the reunion. His daughter brought this greeting: "Tell my family that, although I don't remember them, I still love them."

"That has stayed with me ever since," my colleague writes, "creating each time it comes to mind both a poignant grief and quiet gratitude. The grief comes from my childhood memories of a beloved uncle with a quick wit and deep and generous wisdom who now has so few of his memories left. Yet I can't help but feel a measure of resilient, even defiant gratitude that some emotions, like love, live even beyond our memory. And even though he may have forgotten much -- he nevertheless remembers that we are still bound to each other in love."

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with my people.*

*For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

Can you believe that?

The good news of the gospel is that the God of Israel – who neither slumbers nor sleeps – forgets.

Chooses amnesia – when it comes to our sin – to our vicious cycle.

The good news is that love – and faithfulness – outlast the memory of our disobedience.

The Bible knows that we are in a cycle we cannot break.

And that we yearn with our deepest hope for a chance to start again – to be made new – to be given another chance.

The reason we rehearse this story every year about the love of a savior who turns his face toward a cross is because we don't have break that cycle.

It has been broken for us.

At a cost – to be sure...

but that is what love requires.

So if you are one who worries about how God will perceive you, or how your choices will impact God's grace, or whether it is possible for you to change enough for God to forgive, then I would invite you to stop...and lay that burden down.

Because you are a part of the new covenant.

It is written on your heart.

