

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 7.12.2020



## **A Long Faithfulness**

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

Luke 22:14-23

Near the end of Luke's gospel, there is an account of the last meal Jesus had with his disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest. It is our second scripture lesson this morning.

Let us listen with open hearts for the word of the Lord as it comes to us from Luke, chapter 22, verses 14-23:

“When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” 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.

But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he



is betrayed!” Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! And again let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The church I served for a time in downtown Raleigh boasted gorgeous stained glass windows that were given new life during a sanctuary renovation in 2012. Against newly brightened ceilings and walls, the windows shined all the brighter. The round one in the back - full of deep greens and yellows - would practically be ablaze as our Sunday services would end, and if you took the time to notice it on the way out, Jesus’ words about being “the light of the world” just made a little more sense.

But my favorite time of day to be in that old sanctuary was at night, when the windows at the front changed into a new piece of art altogether. Without the external light, the colors dimmed, but the metalwork that was woven through them, holding those windows together, popped out in high relief, showing new details of the scenes they depicted that I had never really noticed before, or at least hadn’t paid much attention to. It was at night, a couple of years into my ministry there, that it dawned on me that those windows told the story of God’s faithfulness to God’s people through the generations. It was in the metalwork that I saw, in order, the faces of Abraham and Moses and Jesus and the people of God in various postures of praise.

Reading the story of Jesus’ last passover meal with the disciples in the middle of July is a little out of context, I know - we’re not in Holy Week, nor are we preparing for communion - but because of this, it provides us an opportunity to look at the story in a different way, and to notice the theme of God’s faithfulness, which is woven like intricate metalwork into even this colorful scene. We know it well. Jesus and his disciples are gathered together in an upper room for a dinner party - we’ve almost forgotten what those are - and after the meal he gives them



the bread and the cup. And then he says this. This is the articulation of the theme woven in. He gives them the cup, and he says, “This is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the liberation of all people.”

This is the new covenant. It’s not just churchy, liturgical speak to confine to a communion Sunday. Rather, it links what God is doing for his people in Jesus Christ to the long history of what God has done time and again for God’s people. It points to God’s integrity. Uttering the words “new covenant” in that upper room would have transported Jesus’ listeners back to Israel’s experience of exile as surely as the smell of pecan pie transports me back to my grandmother’s kitchen table. *We* may miss the meaning of the words “new covenant”, but those same words would have made *their* hearts leap with recognition and awe. Something extraordinary was happening in their midst. A promise was being fulfilled. And they were being invited to drink it in.

God first speaks this promise of a new covenant through the prophet Jeremiah to the people of God when they are far from home, far from normal routines, unable to imagine a future marked by anything but despair and uncertainty. They are living after the toppling of the Davidic monarchy and the destruction of Jerusalem, which is to say in a time of great political instability. It must have felt to them that their access to God had been permanently imperiled, like God was angry with them, or had taken leave altogether, and they weren’t sure how long it was going to last. It was also the case that the people had a checkered history with God. Like those who had gone before them, they sometimes lived according to God’s promises, and sometimes quite far from them, and stubbornly so. The situation is messy. The relationship, strained.

We can recognize ourselves in that story. In the age of this coronavirus, we may not feel far from home (actually, in a way, that would feel nice, wouldn’t it?). We may not feel far from home, but we feel far from its comforts, far from our normal routines. We feel the same anxiety that comes with not knowing what the future might look like, as we make plans based on partial and ever-changing information just to cancel them, and wonder if schools are going to open and how, and if we’ll



ever get to collect the coffee mugs we left on our desks in mid-March, and when we'll get to hug mom again, and if there will be a job to return to, and how long all of this will last. We're worried over the disparities this illness both exposes and deepens in our society. We're exhausted from doing the mental calculus of safety. We're experiencing rescheduling fatigue. And we, too, know political instability - or at least election year tension, when even the smallest disagreement can feel like an insurmountable ideological break.

But if it is true that we can recognize ourselves in the story of God's people in exile, then we would do well to recognize that it is precisely into that story, and so into our own difficult context, that God speaks a word about a new covenant.

"The days are surely coming," says the Lord. The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant, and you will know that I am your God and you are my people. And I will give you a future marked by healing and mercy and the forgetting of sins. And all of this will be written on your hearts, so that you know it cannot be taken away."

When Jesus takes the language of new covenant upon his lips, I think that he hopes his disciples will hear the echoes of God's promised faithfulness, and they will make the connection deep within their hearts, that in him, by virtue of his self-offering love for his people, we are woven into the long story of divine faithfulness, and we are offered all of the riches of it - so that we may draw strength from those riches for the living of our days. No matter our current context. Even *in* our current context.

It is in Jesus Christ, that God's faithfulness is fully available to us. It is in him - in his life and death and resurrection - that we know the Lord to be our God, and that we are God's people. In him, we are given all that we need for the life of faith in every season. And this does not depend on how we feel, or what we have done or left undone or even what we will do. Remember that Jesus offers the bread and the cup, those sustaining gifts, his very self, to all gathered around that upper room table, and that the gospel writer takes care to note that the one who will



betray Jesus is there, his hand on the table. And in this is grace: that Jesus pours out the cup of the new covenant for all, that we might drink it in and let it change our lives.

When the famous 17th century French scientist Blaise Pascal died in 1662, his servant found a small piece of parchment sewn into his coat. At the top of it, he had drawn a cross. And underneath the cross, he had scrawled these words:

*In the year of the Lord 1654*

*Monday, November 23*

*From about half-past ten in the evening until half-past twelve.*

*God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob*

*Not of philosophers nor of the scholars.*

*Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy, Peace.*

*God of Jesus Christ.*

*My God and thy God.*

*“Thy God shall be my God.”*

....

*Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy....*

That was Pascal’s record of an intense two hour experience of God that changed the course of his life - one that he kept secret until his death. He stored this record in the lining of his coat, not so that he could keep it a secret, but so that it would always be heart-adjacent. And for eight years, he took the time to sew and unsew it every time he changed coats, so that he was never without a reminder of the covenantal love of God in Jesus Christ, that cannot be taken away. I guess he knew he might need that reminder when the feelings inevitably faded.

There are moments in life when it is easy to forget the riches of God’s faithfulness. When the future seems uncertain, things like trust, and joy, and peace can feel like they’re in short supply. And in those moments we can be tempted to think that this is evidence that we have somehow misplaced our trust



in God. That God has walked back the promises on which we've hung our hats. That if we're feeling anxious, or exhausted, or disappointed, or irritable we must be doing something wrong. But here's the thing, my friends. God's faithfulness to us, to you, is intricately woven into every colorful scene of your life. And it holds you fast. And yes, you might sometimes feel like the things you need to live in faith are in short supply. And it is in those times that is okay to stop and tap your coat pockets...to stop and actually read the words you scribbled onto that post-it note on your mirror in a moment of inspiration...to stop and pick up the phone to a friend who always takes your call even if you haven't been that consistent in the relationship lately...to stop and do whatever you need to do to remember that you - even you - have your hand on the table where the new covenant is being poured out for all, and that, in Christ, the God who fulfills his promises to us is as close to you as your own heart.

I wonder how you might carve out space this week to do that very thing.

I wonder how you might answer God's invitation to do that - here in the middle of July 2020 - to pause and remember, and drink in this good news.

And I wonder - I wonder how it might change your life.

To God be the glory, now and forevermore. Amen.

