

## Jeremiah 31:31-34 A New Covenant

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.

## John 12:20-33

### Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

### Jesus Speaks about His Death

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

We've finally arrived at the last week of Lent for 2021; some of us may feel as though the time has flown by, while others may think that it dragged on forever. After all, how does one accurately measure time in a pandemic when so much of how we mark time was changed?

While we are familiar with words such as contract, promise, and oath, we don't use the word "covenant" much anymore and yet the Bible spends a fair amount of time on it. A little context...a covenant is a binding promise of far-reaching importance in the relations between individuals, groups, and nations. It has social, legal, religious, and other implications. A covenant is a promise that is sanctioned by an oath. This promise was always accompanied by an appeal to a deity to "see" or "watch over" the behaviour of the one who has sworn, and to punish any violation of the covenant by bringing into action the curses stipulated or implied in the swearing of the oath. For example, "May God strike me dead if I do not do what I have promised."

Scripture details the forging of multiple covenants: between the nation of Israel and God and individuals like Abraham, Noah, Moses, and David and God. Of course, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus introduces the concept of a new covenant, one embodied in his blood, in the context of the Last Supper.

The Jeremiah passage we read today speaks both to God's relationship with Israel and Judah as individuals and as communities. It is an intimate and personal image, of God leading the people out of Egypt by their hands, as a parent might lead a small child, or of a couple holding hands on a walk. And yet, there is also a note of betrayal, of unwanted separation in the relationship, of heartbreak and grief on the part of the Divine. How amazing it is to realize that our faith tradition includes a God who is able to shift to Plan B when the first draft doesn't work out so well!

And so, the solution seems to be to begin again, to underscore the purpose of the covenant as being more than simply an external commitment, but rather a promise that is embodied within God's people, that is heart-centered, heart-carried, and heart-planted. Hard-earned wisdom tells us that hearts must be broken open; as that sage, Leonard Cohen noted, "there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

A minister once told the story of how he arrived at a new pastoral charge only to be confronted with these words carved roughly with a penknife into his pulpit: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." He noted that it felt to him like a threat rather than a request.

Imagine the disappointment of the people in John's gospel account who wanted to see Jesus, only to discover that he was preparing to 'close up shop' as it were, winding down his ministry, and ceasing the healings and public teachings. And it wasn't to ease into comfy retirement; no, he was looking ahead to what he recognized was an inevitable confrontation with the religious and political powers of his time and place.

At this point on the way to Jerusalem, perhaps anticipating the “Hosannas” of the crowd and hoofbeats of Roman soldiers, each step must have felt as heavy as his troubled soul. In his full humanity, Jesus acknowledges that loss is inevitable and that there is no escaping it in this world, and doesn’t pull any punches in delivering the bad news to his followers that want things to go on as they always had.

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but it is also the godmother of acceptance. The Serenity Prayer, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr and adopted by people in recovery, among others around the world, counsels us to pray: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

It has been a full year since our lives were turned upside down by COVID-19. During the past year, it seemed as though warnings that the church had been hearing for decades came true: our buildings sat empty, at least part of the time; people left, perhaps never to return; and we wondered how we would keep the lights on and the staff paid.

In the days before Holy Week, we also have an opportunity to acknowledge the surprising blessings that emerged as our relationships with God and one another endured interruptions and disruptions in our normal way of doing things. Leaders struggled to learn how to use computer programs they hadn’t heard of the year before...hello, Zoom? Many learned on the fly to make videos with the least expensive equipment possible: laptops propped up on hymnals or cellphones taped to microphone stands, to send out print resources for those not online, and to identify pastoral care needs and attend to them as best they could.

As people of faith, we were all forced to nurture our individual and collective faith from a distance, to try and nurture a sense of belonging in isolation, and to endure an ever-changing cycle of hope and exhaustion and acceptance. We have had to die to old ways of worshipping as a church, and of being the church in our communities. It is a truism that all change involves loss and thus initiates a grief response and it is right and just that we acknowledge that. But, if we are to take Jesus at his word, and he hasn’t steered us wrong before, there will yet be life after death.

Friends, as we approach Easter, might we ask ourselves what grains have fallen to the ground and died in order to bring forth new life? What will bear fruit in the months and years ahead? What is written on our hearts, marking us as people that know God, that belong to God? And if someone comes to us, asking to see Jesus, what will our answer be?

With the grace of God upon us, and the fellowship of the Spirit within us, may our response sound something like this, “Friend, I’m headed there to see him for myself. Shall we journey together?” Amen.

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