

Lent 5-B  
March 18, 2018  
St. John's Cathedral

We began our scripture readings today with these intriguing words from the prophet Jeremiah: "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. " These words came at a time in the sixth century before the Christian era, when many of the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon – a low point in their history and a time of great sadness and lament. Jeremiah's words must have been like comfort in their despair. These words came just before the return to Jerusalem after many years of exile.

A friend of mine often reminds me that we tend to throw words that have deep religious meaning around pretty casually – sometimes without really thinking about what they mean. I think covenant is one of those words. Most of the time we think of a covenant as something that is almost synonymous with contract or agreement. But there is much more to it –especially in this context.

One of my first encounters with this word in a secular context was when I bought a house for the first time. Maybe you've had this experience, too. Among the huge pile of papers to sign at the closing was a set of covenants that governed our neighborhood. For instance, we had to promise to paint our homes in earth tones and have a cedar shake roof. We were not to have people living in campers or motorhomes parked in our driveways or on the street near our homes. You get the picture. These were rules and regulations to keep order and harmony. They did not go unchallenged. One of my

neighbors painted his house sort of a lemon-yellow and added Victorian bric -a -brac. But that's another story.

The neighborhood covenant experience taught me that covenants – in a general sense – have a legal and a relational side. If you violate them, there are consequences. You might have to re-paint your house. But largely they are relational—established to have some agreement among neighbors about what is best for all as they go about their lives. The relational side, I think, is just as important as the legal side. It is about how we live together with respect and trust.

Our main interest today, though, is the covenants that are part of our religious life and history. These, too, have both a legal and a relational side, but are also grounded in our faith. Some of us have entered into the covenant of marriage – a sacramental relationship of asking God's blessing on a life together and promising to live in a way that is respectful, generous, loving, caring and faithful. When we marry we make vows to live in a particular way.

We also enter into a covenant at our baptism – a covenant we renew every time we have witnessed a baptism. When we are baptized we promise to live in a way that honors our relationship with God in Christ and with one another in community.

In the world of Jeremiah's time there were many kinds of covenants, both secular and religious. The Hebrew word *berit*, that means covenant, signifies a bond – or a binding relationship. There were promises and obligations and usually some kind of ritual or ceremony that accompanied them. There were covenants between heads of state, between tribes or nations, between overlords and vassals.

But there were also covenants between God and God's people. We've already met some of these in our readings from Hebrew scripture during Lent. An early and significant one from Genesis is between God and the Hebrew people: "I will be your God and you will be my people." This was foundational. There was a covenant just after the flood in the story of Noah that was between God, all of humanity and all the creatures of the earth. In this covenant God would never again cause a flood to destroy the earth. The sign of that covenant was the rainbow.

And just a couple of weeks ago we heard the covenant given to Moses on Mount Sinai – in which God gave the law --- the Ten Commands as we refer to it. These laws were to give some boundaries to life, shape the relationship with God and one another. You can look at the Ten Commandments and see what the shape of a healthy, respectful and faithful life looks like.

The problem with the covenants and the people of Israel is that they proved to be hard to honor. As we read scripture – particularly the prophets. – we hear many ways the people broke the covenants through unfaithfulness, rebellion, disobedience – all the usual bad behaviors.

Remember – covenants are binding. God kept God's end of the agreement, but the people did not. Some kind of judgment came down because of their unfaithfulness. The exile the people were suffering in Babylon was often seen by the prophets as punishment for their unfaithfulness.

Where we pick up the story today, Jeremiah, speaking for God, announces that God will make a new covenant with both Israel and Judah. "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. I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

What good news for a displaced people who were at a low ebb. Wondering about the future, wondering about everything. It is as if God has hit the reset button, cancelling out the past and starting over. It isn't that the content of the covenant will be all that different, but this time it will be written on their hearts.

Jeremiah is not the only prophet to foresee a significant renewal and change here. In roughly the same period of history, Isaiah prophesies, “Do not remember former things, or consider the thing of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” The prophet Ezekiel tells of a vision of dry bones coming to life – with breath, sinews, flesh. These are the people of Israel who will live and hope and return to the place from which they were exiled.

In all three of these prophecies, we see God meeting God's people where they are – in the depth of their despair and displacement. God brings hope, healing and heart. In the ancient near east, the heart was the seat of intellectual understanding as well as a place of emotion and in today's scripture reading the heart plays a major role.

This new covenant – this new opportunity for relationship – is written on the hearts of God's people. It is a deeper understanding, perhaps a deeper sense of commitment. Covenants, after, all, are about relationship and fidelity.

We revisit this passage from Jeremiah in Lent, reminding us of many things. I've often thought of Lent as a season of the heart. We begin on Ash Wednesday with Psalm 51 – Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. We prayed

that psalm again today. All through this season we pray for a deeper relationship with God. Some of us have been journaling each day with the writings of St. John's gospel and epistles here at the cathedral this year, exploring intimacy with God.

We walk with Jesus toward the cross. We pray that our hearts will be changed in good ways. We hope that our heart is somehow caught up in the heart of God.

What is written on our hearts in this season? How are our hearts moved. By the events of the world around us? The senseless violence that happens both in our community and in faraway places. The despair of the displaced, the hungry, the suffering. How do our prayers and our action flow from this relationship of the heart?

How do we live into that covenant of our baptism that we renew each Easter – a covenant that calls us to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves; to seek justice and peace in our world, to share the good news? How are these things written on our hearts?

We are all a work in progress. We do not have it all figured out. We make poor choices as well as good ones. God loves us and forgives us. This is good news.

As we continue this journey through Lent, a season of the heart, hear these prayerful words of renewal and re-commitment from author and pastor Ted Loder:

Come, Lord Jesus  
startle us with your presence, life-sustaining as air,  
to open our hearts to praise you,  
to open our minds to attend you,  
to open our spirits to worship you,  
to open us to live our lives as authentically and boldly  
As you lived yours.  
amen

