



Sunday, November 20, 2022

Sunday Sermon: Pastor John VanderWindt

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:1-40

Sermon: A Transforming Covenant

Good morning. What a joy it is to share not only about our hearts for God, but also God's heart for us and how God has worked throughout history and now works in our hearts to know Him as well. This morning we're going to look at a piece from Jeremiah.

I invite you to turn with us to Jeremiah 31. Jeremiah is one of the prophets who is sometimes called "the weeping prophet." He is the one who shares the heart of Israel while they are in captivity and he shares the pain about being in captivity. Jeremiah is also the one who wrote the book of Lamentations. And much of Jeremiah is also lamenting. Lamenting how the people of Israel and the people of Judah have lost their way before the Lord.

Within that book of Jeremiah, there are a couple of chapters which are, in some ways, out of place in the sense that they are not talking about the lamenting, but they are talking about the restoration and how God Himself will restore the people of Judah and the people of Israel, and actually bring the people of Israel and Judah back together again as one nation. That piece starts in chapter 30, where it begins on the restoration, and we're going to pick up in chapter 31.

In chapter 31, you're looking at it going, "Oh, that's a long chapter. If he starts talking about every verse, we're going to be here till supper time." Remember, Siggie said it's a tough job. We're not going to talk about every verse but I'm going to pull out a couple of highlights as we go through, and then we're going to focus on verses 31 to 34, which is this turning point within scripture, of showing how God has moved within scripture into changing our hearts, which Siggie so often referred to in our prayers about our hearts turning toward God.

So we're going to begin at Jeremiah 31:1...

1 "At that time," declares the Lord, "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people." **2** This is what the Lord says: "The people who survive the sword will find favor in the wilderness; I will come to give rest to Israel." **3** The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. **4** I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt. Again you will take up your timbrels and go out to dance with the joyful. **5** Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit.

6 There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim, ‘Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.’” **7** This is what the Lord says: “Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations. Make your praises heard, and say, ‘Lord, save your people, the remnant of Israel.’” **8** See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return.

9 They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel’s father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son. **10** “Hear the word of the Lord, you nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands: ‘He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.’”

11 For the Lord will deliver Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they. **12** They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more.

13 Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. **14** I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty,” declares the Lord. **15** This is what the Lord says: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

Side note: Remember in the New Testament when we read about the story of Jesus being born and shortly after, Herod kills the baby boys in Bethlehem? This is the passage they go back to with the great mourning and the weeping. But in many ways within that weeping, it is at a time of celebration when Jesus has come to restore not only the people of Israel but all people.

16 This is what the Lord says: “Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded,” declares the Lord. “They will return from the land of the enemy. **17** So there is hope for your descendants,” declares the Lord. “Your children will return to their own land. **18** “I have surely heard Ephraim’s moaning: ‘You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the Lord my God.

19 After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth.’” **20** Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,” declares the Lord. **21** “Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take. Return, Virgin Israel, return to your towns. **22** How long will you wander, unfaithful Daughter Israel? The Lord will create a new thing on earth—the woman will return to the man.”

23 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “When I bring them back from captivity, the people in the land of Judah and in its towns will once again use these words: ‘The Lord bless you, you prosperous city, you sacred mountain.’

24 People will live together in Judah and all its towns—farmers and those who move about with their flocks. **25** I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.” **26** At this I awoke and looked around. My sleep had been pleasant to me. **27** “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals.

28 Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the Lord. **29** “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ **30** Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge.

31 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. **32** It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. **33** “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34 No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” **35** This is what the Lord says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the Lord Almighty is his name:

36 “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,” declares the Lord, “will Israel ever cease being a nation before me.” **37** This is what the Lord says: “Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,” declares the Lord. **38** “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when this city will be rebuilt for me from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate.

39 The measuring line will stretch from there straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn to Goah.

40 The whole valley where dead bodies and ashes are thrown, and all the terraces out to the Kidron Valley on the east as far as the corner of the Horse Gate, will be holy to the Lord. The city will never again be uprooted or demolished.”

Join me in prayer.

Dear Lord, we have heard your declaration. The words of 'thus saith the Lord.' Lord, we pray that you will now open our ears and our hearts to take them in, and to be able to understand in a much deeper way, your khesed for us but also, Lord, a way in which this New Covenant transforms our hearts and our minds to be with You and to love You. Lord, I pray that the words I speak may be your words and that nothing of me may come out, but that they may be words that you have ordained to be spoken for your people. In Jesus' name. Amen.

As I said before, this section of Jeremiah is where Jeremiah is saying to the people of Israel, "There will come a time when you will be fully restored." He talks about that in verse 31 to 34, this sense of a new covenant. In verse 31, It says, "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel... "

Covenant. That word which means, "the agreement of... " The coming together of two people or two groups of people in agreement to say, "This is how we are going to live together. This is how we are going to respect each other. This is how we are going to function well in the community." And throughout the Old Testament, there have been many covenants which have been made between the people of God and God Himself. And each one of those covenants has been initiated by God. Many of them have been in response to the disobedience of people.

If we start back in Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve sinned, God said to them, "I will make a covenant with you and I will put enmity between you and the serpent, and I have already in mind a plan in which I can restore you." A number of years later, we read about Noah and the ark. After the ark settled down and there was the rainbow and God said, "That rainbow is a sign of my covenant with you that I will never again destroy the earth with a flood. A number of years later, God came to Abraham and God said to Abraham, "I make a covenant with you that you will be the father of a great nation. And I will be your God and you will be my people."

To seal that covenant, they had a tradition in which you would take an animal, you would divide it in half, and you would walk between the animals and you say, "If I break this covenant, may what happens to this animal happen to me. And God, through His Spirit walked between those animals and Abraham did not. So in these first three covenants, there was a sense of God doing all the work. Then it says in verse 32, "It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt... "

Then we get what we know as the Mosaic covenant where God says to the people of Israel, "I have taken you now from captivity. I am bringing you into the land to be My people, and I am going to make a covenant with you, and here's what you should do to keep the covenant." So God gave the law which we often talk about The 10 commandments, and He gave them on two tablets of stone, and He said, "Here it is. I promise to be your God. I promised to take care of you. Here's what your responsibilities are." And the people of Israel had to say, "I promise that I will take no other gods before you. I promise that I won't make an image of you. I promise that I will..." you can fill out the rest of the rules.

And we know what happens. In that one, we have seen the people of Israel over and over again, not obey those commandments. God said to them, "Look, you need to obey them. If you don't, destruction will happen." We see it begin after the reign of Solomon, where there is a split between the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah. When you follow the lines of the kings of Israel at the end of each king, it says, "... and they did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord." It came to a point where God said, "Enough."

And the Assyrians overtook the Israelites. If you look at the line of Judah, there are a number where it says, "... and they did evil in the eyes of the Lord." But there are a few who understood, like Josiah last week, when they read the book of the law and they repented and they said, "Lord have mercy on me."

But we know that in time, Judah was also taken into captivity. Now here was Jeremiah speaking to these people and he's saying to them, "There will be a new covenant." "This New Covenant," it says, "will be with the people of Israel and the people of Judah." And then jump down to verse 33 where it says, "'This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time.' So Jeremiah is already beginning to tell them, "Look, there is coming a time when there will be a new covenant, and in that covenant, we will not only be restored as Israel and Judah, but we will be restored as the people of Israel together. One Nation. And when that new covenant comes, we will be restored."

But then let's look at the results of that new covenant. In verse 33 it says, "I will make the covenant. This covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people." I will put the law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

Here is the transforming piece of this new covenant. The old covenant had stone tablets in which were the law of God. And so when people would look at it, they would say, "Okay, here is what God wrote. How do I do this? It is all external." Now, God is saying, "There will come a time when I will put it within them."

In fact, in the NIV it says, "I will put my law in their minds." Other translations say, "I will put my law within them." In the Hebrew, it says, "I will put my law in their entrails." In their gut, in the very being of who they are. So it's not just a head thing. It is all encompassing with our whole being, our emotions, our thoughts, everything within us. You know how people say, "I have a gut feeling?" That's what it'll be. It'll be this time when you say, "I know in my gut what God wants me to do." And then it says, "I will write it on their hearts." The term "write" there, let's go back to Moses. Imagine now you're Moses and you have to write down the law of God.

God hands you a stone tablet. "Here you go, Moses. Oh, and by the way Moses, this has to last for a number of years, so write it well." How is Moses going to write on that tablet? There is a definite engraving into the stone and when God writes on our hearts, it's not with water paint that just comes off real quick. God engraves on our hearts His love and His desire for us.

It is engraving with His blood that He does this. In fact, if we flip over a couple of books to the book of Ezekiel, Ezekiel kind of picks up this theme in Ezekiel 36 starting in verse 25 when He says, "I will sprinkle clean water on them and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

When God writes on our hearts His law and He puts it within us, it is saying in many ways, "These stone tablets which were exterior, hard and unable to keep, I'm going to change this stone to a heart of flesh. I'm going to be at a point where you say, 'It is my great desire to obey you - not out of punishment.' William Barclay puts it this way. "Men will obey God not because of the terror of punishment, but because they loved Him. They will obey Him not because the law has compelled them unwillingly to do so but because the desire to obey Him was written on their hearts."

The most tremendous thing about the new covenant is that it makes man's relationship to God no longer dependent on man's obedience, but entirely on God's love. God says here again, "Remember the Mosaic covenant, "I am giving you this and here's what you have to do." Now God is saying in this New Covenant, "It's not getting rid of the rules, but I am giving you this and I will help you keep my law because I will embed it within you. It will become part of your DNA to want to worship Me because it's out of love."

The most tremendous thing about the new covenant is that it makes man's relationship to God no longer dependent on man's obedience, but entirely on God's love. God says here again, remember with the Mosaic Covenant, I am giving you this and here's what you have to do. Now God is saying in this New Covenant, it's not getting rid of the rules. But I am giving you this and I will help you keep my law because I will embed it within you. It will become part of your DNA to want to worship me because it's out of love.

Last week when Glenn preached and he talked about this aspect of repentance, he talked about after that it's a matter of asking Christ within us and asking Jesus into our heart. In Jeremiah, he is saying that God has said to you, "I'm going to take that heart which was hard and cold and I'm going to replace it with a heart of flesh that's warm and beating in rhythm with My heart. That you may know God as God knows me." And here He says, "This is that New covenant."

When we look at history, we realize that that New covenant happens when Christ comes and He dies and rises again. And then, after He ascends to heaven in Acts 2, we hear and read about the coming of the Holy Spirit descending on people. So in that place, God is saying, "Here's the time when I have taken my spirit and I have put it within you so that my Spirit dwells in you, takes your heart, and transforms it into a heart which is passionate for me."

And then when we read on in verse 34, it says, "No longer will they teach their neighbor or say to another, know the Lord, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord."

There will come a time when people will know who God is and Romans 1:20, it says, "For since the creation of the world, God has made himself known." So people know that there is a God. But Jeremiah is saying, "There will come a time when the Spirit will infuse people so that they get to really know who God is." The Hebrew word for no is "yada." When we say no, we often think of strictly knowledge. The Hebrew word here used - yada - is the same word that we read in Genesis 4:1, where it says, "Adam knew his wife and they had a child." And we know what that means. There is a deep, intimate knowledge of God.

And so here Jeremiah is saying, "There will come a time when people will have this deep, intimate knowledge of who God is." Remember, Jeremiah is in a time in which the only way you heard about God was if a prophet spoke from God. The only way you knew what God wanted to say is if a prophet says, "Thus saith the Lord" and then spoke. And the only way you ever spoke to God was when you went to the temple and you said to the priest, "Please bring this offering to the Lord."

And now Jeremiah is saying that in this New Covenant, there will be a space in which you can hear the voice of God. In which you can say to God, "My Father, who Art in heaven, I love You." It opens this pathway that we have direct access to God, and we can know Him. Some people might be thinking, "If God speaks to me and I speak to God, and I get to know Him, then that takes care of the minister's job, right? It just got a lot tougher." But that's not what Jeremiah is saying. Jeremiah says, "Everyone has the ability to know God, not just those who are educated."

It says, "From the least of them to the greatest." But we all understand that if we are truly about to know something or get to know better, we need community. We know that there are people who know more about whatever subject we're looking at than we do. And so we look it up. Thank you Google, right? We know that there's this knowledge that's out there and we passionately want to learn more about stuff.

So when Jeremiah says, "You will know. Yes, you know, you have direct access to God's voice to you, and your voice to God." But there's also then within you this heart, which says, "I need to know more. I need to be in the community. I need to meet with small groups where we can discuss what Scripture says, to understand it more deeply. Because I know that within my own finite being, I will never know it all. And so I need others around me, to help me grow in that faith and in that space."

And then at the end, it says, "For I will forgive their wickedness and their sins will be no more." I would like to invite you to turn to the New Testament, because there's this wonderful passage in Hebrews 8, which takes place after the death and resurrection of Christ.

So now we have Jeremiah who is speaking this before Christ comes and Jesus comes and brings in this New Covenant and in Hebrews 8:7-13, it says this, **7** "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.

8 But God found fault with the people and said: "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. **9** It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. **10** This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

11 No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. **12** For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." **13** By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear. It is not that God is saying, "The rules don't count." But God is saying, "What is obsolete, is that now there is a way for you to be free and to have your sins forgiven, so that you will no longer be condemned by those rules.

John Calvin on this piece writes, "There are two main parts in the covenant. The first regards the gratuitous remission of sins. That's what we need. And the other, the inward renovation of the heart." That's that second part. That changing from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh. And then he says, "There is a third, which depends on the second and that is the illumination of the mind as to the knowledge of God."

So we are now living in a time which takes place, that we are part of that new covenant, that we are in the space where Jesus says, "I come in and I live within you so that you may flourish and have life." In Hebrews 10:15-18, it says, "First he says: **16** "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." **17** Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." **18** And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary."

We are part of that new covenant. We are in that space where God says, "I will place within you a new heart, a heart which gives life to the heart of God." Last week, Glenn had a picture of Butchart Gardens, as it began as a quarry. It was just rock. That is our heart of stone. Then he showed a picture of it as a flourishing garden. That picture is that same idea of God saying, "I'm putting within you a heart of flesh, that you may have life and that life may create beauty for you and beauty for those around you. Those around you who see that life within you will ask you, "What is it that gives you the hope and the life?" And you men can share with them the gift of Jesus."

We are coming into the time of Christmas. Next week already begins the season of Advent. It is that time of waiting for Jesus to arrive. Jeremiah was in that time of waiting for Jesus and the New Covenant to arrive. We are on the other side and we know that it's there. And this year as a theme for Advent, we're going to talk about an invitation.

An invitation for ourselves to meet God in a new way, but also an invitation for ourselves to speak with those around us and invite them to also know the God who in dwells within us and changes our heart of stone to a heart of flesh and lives and gives life within us.

Join me in prayer.

Dear Lord, we thank you for the life that you give us. We thank you Lord that you have engraved Your name on our hearts as You have also engraved our names in the Book of Life. Lord, we ask that you will continue to soften our hearts and mold our hearts.

And any pieces of stone that is there, that you will remove them so that we may truly have a heart of flesh that is cleansed by your blood. and that lives fully for you. That your heart and mind and desires may be within us so that our gut feelings may be the same as the way you want us to live. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry* 