

Lent 5, Year B, RCL  
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Jeremiah 31:31-34 Psalm 51:1-13 Hebrews 5:5-10 John 12:20-33

The Israelites are again in captivity; this time, for a period of about 70 years under Babylonian rule. The prophet Jeremiah realizes that the Israelites have not kept the Mosaic covenant made at Mt. Sinai all those years ago, when they were freed from 400 years of enslavement under the Egyptians. From Exodus 19 -34,

The Israelites escape from Egypt and cross the Red Sea, then camp in the Desert of Sinai. God call to Moses from Mt. Sinai and says to him, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: *'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" (Exodus 19: 3-6 NIV).

This time, the Israelites again are in exile; we know it as the Babylonian captivity, and it lasted for 50 years or more. For forty years, the prophet Jeremiah tells the people and their kings that unless they truly repent and change their ways, they will not, as a people, survive. Over and over again, the Israelites break the covenant that God made with Moses. We remember that covenants, initiated by God, usually have a "God's part" and "the people's part." The Israelite's part in the Mosaic covenant is to obey the whole of the law in the Torah. Jeremiah writes, *"they obeyed not, nor inclined their ear, but walked every one in the stubbornness of their evil heart"* (11:8; 31:32). For about 29 chapters, the book of Jeremiah recounts the transgressions of the people. (We will not be reading all of those chapters today – whew!) An entire people, God's chosen for covenant after covenant, will be destroyed because of their long time of refusing to respond to and turn back to God.

Jeremiah, often called the Weeping Prophet, takes a break from listing the people's transgressions; we hear completely different words today. These few chapters, called "The Little Book of Consolation," contains a strong message of hope. Our contemporary message from this ancient writing? This is same level of hope to which we hold onto, even cling to, today.

Our exile is a mini one, a time in the desert of our year, of our lives. Lent is our season of repenting and returning to God, of looking deeply at the ways in which we fall away from God. We are invited to a holy Lent, marked by "self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word (BCP 265). We look to God's promise, as expressed in Jeremiah and the psalmist, to forgive our iniquity and to blot out our offenses. Have mercy on me, wash me, cleanse me – powerful words of pleading to God for God's grace in recognition of the ways we separate ourselves from God by our behavior, thoughts, and ways of life.

On the other side of exile, the other side of Lent, there has to be – there will be – a new way of being. In the covenant formula, God reveals Godself as God (I will be your God), and we are called to acknowledge God as God and to respond in faith (you will be my people). You're God; we belong to you. But what makes this covenant different, even "new?" The covenant hasn't worked so far!

We might think about covenant in its legal terms, just as we try to use the Ten Words (Ten Commandments) as a checklist: we're good or bad, right or wrong, sinners or saved. Very dualistic. But when God says "I will write my law on your heart," God is not talking about an emotion. In the ancient world, body metaphors were

different – the nose represented anger, the right arm could mean power, and the heart – the heart is the home of the will, of our intentions. From author Dennis Bratcher

(<http://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Cproper24ot.html>):

To "*love the Lord your God with all your heart*" (Deut. 6:5-9) is to make a conscious, willful decision to **pursue** that course of action and **put it into practice in living**, not just to have a good warm feeling about God.

On the other side of Lent, God changes us, changes our heart, inclines our intentions to God. "*I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*" God's new promise is unconditional: "I will be," and "you will be." God forgives us, and God's forgiveness is complete – God is the one who perfectly forgives and forgets – wipes it off the whiteboard, blackboard, forever.

Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah places God acting on behalf of God's people into a place and time. This Little Book of Consolation shows us that God is one not only of second chances, but new beginnings, of wiping the slates clean, over and over again. God loves us beyond our sins, beyond our failures, beyond, from today's collect: our unruly wills and affections. God pouring this grace upon us continues to change our hearts, to make our turning to God part of who we are, bodily. We look to the new covenant of Jesus, and know the lengths to which God goes to love us. God wants us to be in relationship, and God will make it happen. We best know God today through the person of Jesus.

On our lowest of days, your lowest of days, read the passage:

I will be your God and you will be my people. Our failures are never the end of the story. God continually enacts covenant, writing it in our hearts anew every day (every moment). In Egypt, God heard the people's cries. In Babylonia, God wrote God's word into our being. In Jesus, God in flesh joins in our cry. "*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.*"

As we enter our final week of Lent, plunge into Holy Week, ask God to renew your spirit in response to God. Incline your ear to God in prayer, and reach into the fullness of a holy Lent. Fast. Give alms. Repent. Read God's word and meditate. Easter is coming – *the day is coming*, says the Lord – and right now our task is to prepare, for one more week. We remember that our spiritual disciplines give us freedom. When we spend time with God, turn toward God's will, we are freed to hold loosely the things of this world. We free ourselves to hear the word of God for us. We do not stay in Lent forever. But right now, it's still here.

Prepare to walk with Jesus – before, during, and beyond his crucifixion. Walk with one another, in community, in relationship. As we renew our relationship with God, ask God to repair us in any way in which we are broken, body, mind, and spirit. "*Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me*" would be powerful prayer for this week. Prepare, brothers and sisters, to walk with Jesus once again so we might find the deep and abiding peace of God, to live as one people in God's love. Be assured that God is God and that we are God's people.

Be comforted, maybe prodded a little, and encouraged by these words from Madeleine L'Engle:

"God is not going to abandon creation, nor the people up for trial in criminal court, nor the Shiites, nor the communists, or the warmongers, nor the greedy and corrupt people in high places, nor the dope pushers, nor you, nor me. Bitter tears of repentance may be shed before we can join the celebration, but it won't be complete until we are all there."

As our bishop writes, "I'll see you on The Way."