

Scripture

Jeremiah 31:31–34

A New Covenant

31 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. 32 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. 33 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. 34 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

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 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. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27 “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. 28 Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” 30 Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people[things] to myself.” 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Sermon: Deeper into covenant

As we approach the end of the Lenten season and begin the final steps toward Jerusalem and the wild highs and lows of Holy Week, it is crucial that we understand the ‘why’ of this journey. Why is Jesus doing this thing? What does it mean to us?

The forty days of reflection and focus that we call Lent is meant to lead us to understand a little better the ‘why’ of Easter. None of us has the mind of God, so we won’t have a complete picture, but we *are* made in the image of God so we can expect some intimations of God’s plan – to glimpse it through a looking glass darkly, if you will.

The past four weeks of Hebrew Scripture have had a strong theme running through them – the theme of covenant. We’ve looked at the covenant God made with Noah, with Abram, the covenant of the law given to Moses, and the episode with the fiery serpents, which was not a covenant itself, but ties in as it demonstrates God’s covenant commitment.

As we move through each of these covenants there is a progression; at each new covenant God draws us further into his purposes and involves us more fully as participating partners.

The first covenant with Noah was entirely one-sided. God promised to Noah and his descendants that he would never give up on humanity; he would not destroy them and start over, no matter what humans did. Nothing was required of us – it was all on God.

God then covenanted with Abram to bless him and his offspring and to make them a blessing to all the nations. In response, Abram was to mark himself and his lineage by circumcision. God's people were to carry the physical mark of the covenant in their flesh.

With the covenant of the law given to Moses, God's people were invited to participate further by acting out the covenant in their day-to-day behaviour. The law instructed the people in how to live in ways of mutual respect, caring, and love. At last the covenant was taking on a bit of a reciprocal form – God had his part, and we had some responsibilities as well. We were becoming partners with God, to a limited extent.

This proved to be too much for humanity though. Originally, the law was intended to be a mirror for us to hold up to ourselves. By examining ourselves in light of the law we could see the areas in which we are aligning with God's plan, and also identify the areas in which we need to grow. Actively living under the law was our contribution to the covenant.

However, we didn't do very well at living under the law. Instead of using the law to live increasingly holy lives ourselves, we applied the law to others; instead of following the law as a pathway to life, we used the law to condemn and control those around us. (there are signs here of the domination system, which we will come back to later in this sermon)

We didn't do well under the law; we broke the covenant – repeatedly.

Under the laws of our current legal system a contract depends on both parties fulfilling their obligations. If one side defaults on their part, the entire contract is nullified. This is not the case with God's covenants.

This is what we learned from last week's episode with the fiery serpents. The people broke the covenant; they rejected God and they rebelled against the leader that God appointed over them. And just as the original sin resulted in death and suffering being introduced into creation, the rebellion of the Israelites in the desert resulted in death and suffering within their camp in the form of venomous snakes.

Despite this, remaining true to his promise to Noah, God saved his people. The bronze serpent on a pole that God commissioned Moses to make allowed the Israelites to live even though they had turned from the God of life toward the path leading to death.

Though humanity was not faithful, God remained the faithful covenant partner. Though humans turned away, God continued to do what he said he would. God's faithfulness is not dependent upon our faithfulness, and that is good news for us indeed.

One difficulty with the law was that it was external. It was something outside of us. Perhaps that is why it was so easy for people to use the law externally upon each other, rather than applying it internally as a holiness code.

So, in the days of Jeremiah God tried a different approach. 'In this new covenant,' said God, 'I will write my law upon their hearts.'

Something fundamental inside of us needed to change for us to become faithful. Thus far, the covenants had consisted of head knowledge. God assured Noah that he would not give up on humanity and wipe them out, no matter what they did. God revealed his plans for a place and a people to Abram and promised him and his descendants a role in it. God outlined a way of living through Moses that would keep the people close to God and oriented toward life.

The problem was that all of this was merely information – facts and arguments. Information is rarely transformative. The reason that we continually fall away from God and rebel against God is not cognitive, it has to do with our will. It's not that we don't know what to do or how to be – we know, but we choose to do differently.

In writing the law upon our hearts instead, God was seeking to change something within us. Instead of merely knowing what is right, God granted us the ability to desire what is right. This changes everything.

No longer will the law be engraved in stone and displayed for all to see but for none to follow. Now the covenant of the law will be engraved in our hearts and so displayed in our lives.

There has been a trajectory described in our Lenten lectionary journey. Throughout the covenants God has made with his people he has been inviting us deeper and deeper into each covenant. At each step we have become more active participants, and less bystanders. With the new covenant in Jesus' blood, which we will delve into deeper on Maundy Thursday, and the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, we have come to a place where, while we are not full partners, we certainly are agents of change in the new kingdom.

Indeed, we are co-creators with Christ. This is a grand statement, but it is backed up in Jesus' own words 'Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.'

Jesus expects us to follow his lead, and he will empower us with the Spirit.

So what are the works that we are to do? Well, what are the works that Jesus did?

Jesus did many, many things, but Jesus' central act, the one thing we come back to over and over and over again, is his submission on the cross. The cross was Jesus' submission, the resurrection God's assurance/guarantee/confirmation/affirmation.

What did Jesus accomplish on the cross? Last week I spoke of one component of the crucifixion – solidarity. By allowing himself to be crucified, Jesus was demonstrating in no uncertain terms that nothing would tear him away from us – not fear of suffering, or suffering itself. Not betrayal, not mocking, not death – even death at the hands of his own creation.

The crucifixion shows us that Jesus is indeed Emmanuel, God with us. But, what else is Jesus accomplishing?

According to our reading of John this morning, the crucifixion also judges the world and drives out the ruler of the world. What does this mean?

The world, *kosmos*, is not synonymous with God's creation, but is rather the fallen realm that exists estranged from God and in opposition to God. The *kosmos* is a superhuman reality that is concretely embodied in structures and institutions that aggressively shapes human life and seeks to hold human beings captive to its ways. *Kosmos* is probably best translated as the system.

And this system is driven by a spirit, the ruler of the world, whose ways are domination, violence, and death.

What is the system? Consumerism that does not bring us life, and brings death to others in sweatshops, breeds economic deprivation and results in environmental degradation.

The system is shaped by hierarchies of winners and losers, and often we don't seem to be able to think in any other terms than winners and losers. My gain can only be the result of another's loss, and that can only happen through force of some kind.

This idea of force is central to the domination system. Walter Wink calls this the myth of redemptive violence.

According to this myth the way to bring order out of chaos is through violently defeating the other; the way to deal with threats from enemies is by violently eliminating them. This myth plays itself out everywhere in our culture.

Every movie from the Shootout at OK Corral, to Star Wars and the Transformers, in which the good guys give the bad guys a thrashing promotes this idea of redemptive violence. Peace comes through awe inspiring use of force. Think of shock and awe overseas in the nineties.

Consider the absurdity of the war on terror. Apparently, America will stop terrorism by disappearing people, waterboarding, torture at Gitmo, and drone strikes on people all around the globe. The answer to violence is always greater violence, and thus we arrive at the utterly surreal point in which people in all seriousness think that the solution to school shootings is to give all the teachers guns.

When I was in the West Bank I watched an Israeli teacher leading his class down the street with an M16 hanging off his chest. I don't know what surprised me more – seeing an automatic assault rifle as standard gear on a school trip, or the fact that everybody seemed to think this was completely normal – there was no reaction at all. Teachers with guns. That will keep us safe.

Everything in our culture seems to be couched in combative terms; we battle cancer, we defeat poverty – even our most civilized processes like democratic election campaigns where we would expect to see the best of people brought to the fore are marred by bitter conflict and mud-slinging.

We overthrow domination with more domination and it's an endless cycle. We can't escape it.

But, Jesus refused to meet violence with violence. Indeed, in his trial before Pilate Jesus suggests that violence, which he rejects, is central to the system. In response to Pilate's questioning, Jesus replies, My

kingdom is not from the *kosmos*, the system. If it were, my followers would be *fighting* to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.

Fighting, redemptive violence, is at the heart of *kosmos*, and it is what the ruler of *kosmos* desires. Jesus' rejection of violence is precisely what distinguishes his way from the way of the system.

On the cross Jesus publicly and dramatically judged the system by exposing it for what it is – the way of death. Jesus clearly showed that the myth of redemptive violence that lies at the core of our culture ultimately leads to an innocent man being nailed to a tree.

Martin Luther King's nonviolent resistance to racism was modeled after Jesus' crucifixion. When the white 'powers that be' turned dogs and firehoses on the marchers and those images were splashed across the television – the reality of white racism was graphically and publicly exposed for all to see. There is no denying the ugliness, there is nowhere to hide.

The cross is revelation. I touched on this last week and will continue to come back to this theme. The cross reveals the sin of this world as it also reveals the unfailing love of God.

The direction of the covenant texts draw us deeper and deeper into covenant, and invites us to greater and greater levels of participation along with God. The form that our participation takes is to be salt and light to the world – a blessing to all nations. That is our covenant duty.

We do that by living in God's peaceable Kingdom, rather than the kingdom of this earth. We do not meet anger with anger, or violence with violence. We don't repay evil with evil. Jesus responded to evil with patient, enduring love.

In so doing, he exposed the domination system for what it is. He judged it, cast out its ruler, and invited us into a new, alternative way of life in the midst of a violent world – a life of covenant partnership that spreads life in its wake, that counteracts the forces of death.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.