

The Hope That Is a Promise

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

8th in a nine-part series

August 28, 2011

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Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It 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. ³³But 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. ³⁴No 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.

Luke 22:15-20 (NRSV)

¹⁴When the hour came, he [Jesus] took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

There are promises and there are promises. There is hope and there is hope. But when God makes a promise, hope becomes a sure thing; a certainty not a probability.

We’ve all seen the cartoon. A lone figure with bushy hair, a scraggly beard, dressed in rags standing on a street corner holding a sign reading, “Repent! The end is near!” This political season, I’ve heard more than few speeches referred to as “jeremiads” meaning a list of woes and complaints often delivered in a tirade. And yes, it is a reference to Jeremiah. It isn’t really unfair because Jeremiah was given the weighty task of telling God’s people that the end was upon them, that they were headed over the cliff. They had passed the point of return; there was nothing that would forestall the looming disaster. And it all came to be, just as we’ve seen. The Babylonians rolling over Jerusalem and destroying the temple.

But sadly, all we often hear about is Jeremiah, the so-called prophet of doom and gloom; never, Jeremiah the prophet of hope.

In the depth of Israel’s despair, as they anticipated rebuilding shattered lives a thousand miles from home, as they tried to hang on to one another and to the LORD God, Jeremiah brought them a message of hope, or promises kept, of a new covenant.

The New Covenant

Earlier in the summer, we devoted a few weeks to the Law of Moses. We saw that God had made a covenant with his chosen people after saving them from slavery in Egypt and that the Ten Commandments, written on stone tablets, lay at the heart of God’s instruction for his people. Though the Israelites cherished God’s law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unable to live as God had taught them. They proved unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

The consequences of the people's endless abandonment of God and God's ways culminate in the death of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Nonetheless,

What do you desire?

We live as we desire to live. Even if we are burdened by bad choices we once made or by circumstances thrust upon us, the biblical view is that we live the sort of life that we wish to live. But there is a BIG problem here: though we are made in God's image, we do not naturally desire God nor the things of God. It is this lack of desire for God that underlies all the biblical talk about new hearts, new selves, new clothes, new creation, and the rest.

We sometimes use words such as "conversion" to describe this change of heart, this newly found desire for God. For without this rebirth, this renewal of our hearts, we will not live as God's New Covenant people. We won't even want to. Paul understood that in establishing new churches, he was really running around founding colonies of a new human race – a race with hearts turned toward God!

Christians often put too much emphasis on the timing of this rebirth. In truth, most Christians couldn't tell you the moment of their rebirth. (John Wesley thought he could, but then six months later told his brother he wasn't so sure!) I know that I could not. But I do know that today, I desire God. I want to walk in God's way, to live today and every day in a manner that is pleasing to God . . . and I pray every day that God will hold me close and keep the flame of desire burning strong.

If we are to embrace Jesus' challenge, if we are to live as God's New Covenant people, then we must desire it. Such desire cannot be found within us, it is a gift from God. It is a gift that we can pray for every day. Perhaps even the desire to pray for desire is a sign of our own rebirth.

God, through his prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God's people would no longer even have to teach other about God, for they would all know God. God would forgive their faithlessness and not even remember their sin. This would be God's new covenant with his people.

The Last Supper and the New Covenant

Symbols can be emotionally powerful, sometimes enormously so. In his ministry, Jesus' actions were often powerfully symbolic. He ate with the oppressed and despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in the coming of God's kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God's kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover Festival in the days before his death, he went to the temple overturning tables and invoking, in words and action, Jeremiah's judgment on the temple system. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Because of the large crowds in Jerusalem for festival, Jesus and his disciple stayed in Bethany, a "suburb." Now, after sundown on Thursday, the

evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. Here, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the "bread of affliction," (Deut. 16:3). But Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was the seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the "mediator of a better covenant . . . enacted through

better promises” (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus’ own blood. Is it any wonder that early Christians came to embrace the sacredness of the Lord’s Supper?

Mack Stokes, a retired Methodist Bishop, wrote that Communion “awakens a holy memory of what Jesus has done for us and for the whole world . . . this sacrament is a celebration of God’s redeeming love and empowering grace.”¹ We are people of this new covenant. God has put within us a new heart and a new Spirit (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26). We may not always feel this way or act like it, but we are not alone. God is with us. Jesus has ushered in the new covenant foreseen centuries before by Jeremiah.

Living as New Covenant people

Who are we? We are people of this new covenant. What does such a life look like? What does it really mean to live as Jesus has challenged us to live? Much of Jesus’ ministry was devoted to answering these questions. The centerpiece of these teachings is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7.

The Sermon on the Mount is a picture of a world turned upside-down. It was profoundly counter-cultural 2,000 years ago and it is no less so now. Jesus challenges us to surrender our anger, to pray for those who persecute us, to be faithful to our spouses in our thoughts as well as our actions. Does it not seem profoundly naïve to suggest that the meek (the gentle) will inherit the earth? When Jesus says “turn the other cheek,” is it an invitation to be a doormat? We certainly don’t have the space here to address all the questions that these teachings raise, but we don’t really need to right now. What we *do* need to do is to see that Jesus’ challenge is far more radical than we might think. It is about much more than being nice.

Jesus’ Galilean listeners ached to hear a call for revolution, violent if need be. But Jesus quickly and firmly turned their world upside-down. They wanted vengeance on the Romans and Jesus instead taught them about forgiveness and mercy. If a Roman ordered a disciple to carry his pack one mile, the disciple was to carry it two. Jesus called them all to a new way of being God’s people, or at least it was new to them. Jesus challenged Israel to *be* Israel. In the same way, it is a challenge to Christians to *be* Christians, even if being Christian means something radically different from what we thought, even if being Christian demands a price we thought we’d never be willing to pay.

Jesus cannot be tamed. He does not allow us to stay in our comfort zones, waiting for others to step forward. He calls for us all to rise to the challenge . . . just as did Jeremiah.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

It can be very difficult for us to see the radical nature of the Christian life. What do you think are the key characteristics of the Christian life? In which parts of your life does Jesus’ challenge in the Sermon on the Mount run head-on into the “real world” and the “realities” of living the modern life? What do you find to be most radical in living as God’s New Covenant people? Try to be specific and concrete. How can we begin to embrace Jesus’ “counter-cultural” message? What are two or three concrete steps? Bear in mind that in all this, we are NOT to withdraw from the world. How can we be the “light to the world” if we are in hiding? God works through us and with us, not in spite of us.

¹ Mack B. Stokes, *Major United Methodist Beliefs*, Abingdon Press. This book is available at Cokesbury and is an excellent introduction to the common heritage of United Methodists. It has been through many printings and a couple of editions!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Jeremiah 24-25 Vision of the good and bad figs; summary of the judgment against the nations	Tuesday, Jeremiah 29:1-32 Jeremiah's letters to the exiles
Wednesday, Jeremiah 30 Promised restoration for Israel and Judah	Thursday, Jeremiah 31 Restoration and new covenant
Friday, Jeremiah 32-33 Is anything too hard for the Lord? YES!!; restoration and promises	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott's 11:00 Class in Festival Hall

The current series:

Culture Soup: hidden stories that shape our lives

Aug 28 - "The New Age"

Sept 4 - "Salvation by Therapy"

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Scott's Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

We have just begun a new study of the gospel of John.

Join us whenever you can. This is very "drop-in."

Bring a lunch if you like.

Bring a study Bible.

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Scott Engle is leading a trip to the Holy Land in the fall of 2011.

60 St. Andrew folks are going! There are still a few places open.

In addition to Israel, we will visit the Pyramids, Ephesus, Athens, and Rome. It will be quite an experience. There is still time to join us.

For more information, go to www.scottengle.org.

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