

GRACE WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS

Pentecost 21 – Year C ✕October 17, 2010

Jeremiah 31:27-34✕Psalm 119:97-104✕2nd Timothy 3:14-4:5 ✕Luke 18:1-8

*Grace, written on
our hearts, is
what God calls us
to imagine.*

God who writes the covenant on our hearts; God who calls us towards truth; God who is always faithful: hear our prayers this day. Help us to know and understand your covenant, your truth, your faithfulness. Amen.

The promise of a new covenant, written in a new way. A time foreseen when our “itchy ears” will draw us away from the truth. A parable that speaks of God’s faithfulness.

The scriptures that come together in this morning’s readings can help us find and hold onto the strong-center, the well-balanced, and sure-foundation of God’s best gift. The reading from the Book of the Prophet

Jeremiah begins our journey today. The Kingdom of Israel, the Northern Kingdom that formed a new political and social contract after the death of Solomon, was long gone. Its defeat at the hands of the Assyrian Empire had been not only the end of its life as a nation, but also the end of its history.

As far as we know from history, the kingdom – from its rulers, through the ruling class, through whatever middle-class might have existed, the farmers, the peasants, and even the livestock – were annihilated. Genocide and ethnic cleansing on a vast scale had created the myth and legend of the ‘lost 10 tribes of Israel.’ The Northern Kingdom was finished.

Most of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah are warnings to the so-called Southern Kingdom. That remnant of the House of David whose center of life was still in Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon. Their turn was coming. However, we learn from Jeremiah’s

dream that their devastation was not going to be so complete.

Rather than being ethnically cleansed and the victims of genocide, the House of Judah – the rulers and people of the Southern Kingdom – would be carried into exile. Captivity in Babylon awaited them. Captivity – a bad enough fate, for certain. But not the same thing as utter annihilation. Even with the military, political and economic devastation of their pending defeat at the hand Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah was given a vision of the restoration of the people of God.

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. 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, . . . 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. No longer shall they teach one another . . . for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

This is a radical and new thing. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, this is ‘the prophetic imagination’ at its very best. Looking through the defeat, through the exile, through the return, and looking towards *the days that shall surely come* Jeremiah brings a word from God that is new and fresh, and at the same time, eternal and unchanging.

In the words of the prophecy, we hear from an intimate and loving God. One who took our ancestors by the hand and led them out of Egypt. A God whose heart was broken when our ancestors broke the covenant made at Sinai.

The Sinai covenant was different in many ways from the new covenant that Jeremiah anticipated. The covenant on Sinai, using a very broad-brush of rhetorical language, can be described as an contract.

- God offers a relationship that looks a great deal like a contract.
- If the people accept, their obligations under the contract are to obey the terms.
- If the people fail to live up to their end of the bargain, there will be consequences.

The covenant on Sinai, as the story has been preserved for us, was written on stone.

And now we have a new story. That God has given Jeremiah the imagination to dream of a different covenant. Jeremiah imagines that God still desires to be in relationship with the people:

- I will be their God.
- They will be my people.
- I will put my law within them, written on their hearts.

There is no language of obligation. *In the days that are surely coming*, this covenant will be completely one-sided. The iniquity of the people is forgiven. No mention of repentance. No mention of sacrifice. No mention of confession, or no mention – heaven forbid! – of even a priest.

Prophetic Imagination at its very best. Especially for a people who were looking over their shoulders at the armies of Babylon on their borders, and who were remembering the utter destruction of their Northern Kingdoms.

Receiving the gift of this incredible, imaginative prophecy from Jeremiah

is one thing. Living into that gift as a reality is an all-together-different-thing.

Whoever wrote the 2nd Letter to Timothy – and it certainly was not written Paul, or written to Timothy – tells us that even in those early days after the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the people were still reliant on written texts and needed teachers. Jeremiah imagined a time when the people of God would no longer need to teach each other – because everyone, *from the greatest to the least, would know God*.

The author of this 2nd Letter to Timothy well-understood the reality that Jeremiah's imagination had not yet come to fulfillment.

The Christian world today, especially so much of the manifestation of American Christianity that infects our common life, proves – to me at least – that our society still has “itchy ears”, as the letter to Timothy says. Prone to leaving the truth, and following after those who tell us lies.

Like the lie that the United States is a Christian nation.

Like the lie that God uniquely favors America over other countries and peoples in the world.

Like the lie that our foreign policy, our economic priorities, and our military actions are somehow the working out of God's plan for this world.

Each of those ideas are lies. Told to us by teachers who would lead us away from the truth.

The prophetic imagination that was God's gift to Jeremiah, and the Hebrew people's gift to the world, is the story of a covenant of Grace.

A covenant not written on stone.

A covenant that does not need to explained or television evangelists, and does need to be executed politicians.

A covenant from God, who utterly desires to be in relationship with creation.

A covenant of Grace from God who is as faithful, as the judge in Luke's parable was unjust.

Grace. In the person of Jesus Christ, is what God calls us to know.

Grace. Known in the lives of all with whom we share this planet , and who God calls us to love.

Grace. Written on our hearts, is what God calls us to imagine.