

**For Sunday 29 March 2009 – Fifth Sunday in Lent
Church of the Ascension, Hilton**

When God tries again: On Jeremiah 31: 31-34

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Message:

God is passionately in love with us. God longs to give us every good thing if we will respond to God's love

Sermon Introduction

This is a wonderfully affirming reading from the prophet Jeremiah. Some scholars say that it is the high point of the Hebrew Bible, the most important statement in the Hebrew Scriptures of the nature of the gospel that was to come with Jesus Christ...
... It has a lot to say about the intense love God has for us and about the intimate and beautiful relationship God has promised to share with us.

The books of the prophets like Jeremiah are mainly collections of sermons that they preached. Jeremiah was a preacher, not a writer, with a secretary named Baruch who took notes as Jeremiah preached for publication later. What was read is a brief summary of a sermon that Jeremiah preached.

With adaptations, I have taken this work from an Australian Baptist minister, Nathan Nettleton, whose work I sometimes read – he writes the liturgical prayers that I sometimes use at the Eucharist. Yes, it may surprise you to learn that a Baptist writes prayers for the Eucharist, and when you read them you would think they come from an Anglican Prayer Book. However, don't put Baptists in a box, just as we don't want to be put into an "Anglican box"! He has an appreciation for good liturgy, and his liturgical offerings tie up with the Lectionary Readings for the day, providing a "common thread" through the service between the readings, sermon and Eucharistic prayers. I hope you will find this helpful.

With a little poetic license and embellishment this is an attempt to re-preach the sermon in the way that Jeremiah might have spoken it to us if he had been here this morning. Jeremiah was speaking for God, so don't be put off when it sounds like I'm talking as though I was God. I don't think I am, I'm just preaching the way Jeremiah did.

These are the days, says the Lord, when I invite you into a new covenant, into a new committed relationship of love and trust and security. These are the days when I offer myself to you, when I offer to share myself with you for the rest of time. I have shown myself to you, I have come among you and proven to you that my love for you could withstand even torture and death, and now I invite you to respond to that love and to accept the commitment I am offering you.

This new covenant will not be like the old covenant that I made with those who went before you thousands of years ago. In those days I found my people in Egypt. I found them broken and suffering. They were being cruelly abused by a people who cared nothing about them and who sought only to exploit them for whatever they could get out of them.

Like a lover who sees their beloved viciously bashed in some mindless act of random violence, I was distressed and anguished, and I reached out my hands in tenderness and pity, and wiped away the blood from their wounds and the tears from their eyes and took them out of that place to a place of safety and healing.

And when their wounds were healed and they were safe from their oppressors I offered to commit myself to them, fully and forever, if they would offer in return to be faithful to me alone and to live lives of justice and righteousness, to show all the world the light of my love.

And so we committed ourselves to one another as in marriage, in a binding covenant relationship. And I loved them and cherished them and gave them every good thing. Whatever they needed for happiness and fulfillment I gave them and I kept them safe from anything that sought to harm them. I explained to them carefully the ways they should live that would ensure that their lives were long and joyful and fulfilling. I was their God and they were my people.

But despite my love and my faithfulness, they broke the covenant, they tore up our marriage certificate, they threw back the wedding ring I had placed on their finger and they spat in my face. And my heart was torn in two as I saw them go out and prostitute themselves on the streets to others who cared nothing for them, who just used them and raped them and ripped them off. I couldn't hold back the tears as I watched and saw the life and vitality draining from their faces as they were sucked dry and cast aside on the garbage heap of humanity and yet still they would not return to the warmth and safety of my arms.

I was grieved, I was deeply hurt, I was shattered to the core, but still I longed to be reunited with them. Despite the humiliation of having my love treated with such public contempt, my love for them never died.

So I decided to do away with the old covenant and offer a completely new covenant, one with a more human face. I became one of you and I came and lived among you. I walked on your streets, ate in your homes, worked in your workplaces. I found among you the same agonies and frustrations that I had felt when your ancestors betrayed me and scorned me. I experienced the struggles of living in your society and the pressures from every side to compromise your integrity and your faith.

I learned all too painfully just how costly it can be to take a stand against hatred, violence and greed. I know how deep the fear is when faced with the powers of evil and corruption and how strong the temptation to turn your face away, to pull your head in and keep your mouth shut. I felt the pain and the grief and the deep scars of your broken families, of your abused and molested children, and of those who grew up in an emotional nightmare, starved of genuine love and affirmation. And I wept. I wept again because I was standing amidst the agony and destruction of a world that scorned my love and care and was now reaping the fruits of its own betrayal.

So I stood amidst the ashes of death and called for life. I called for healing. I called for peace. I called for joy. I called for justice and for righteousness. And I began to live it and to help other fragile hurting people to live it too. And we danced and we sang and we celebrated.

And the powers of death rose up and tore me apart. The powers of darkness who could not stand the arrival of light screamed and spat and clawed and they broke my body and drained the blood of life from my flesh. Take my body, I have given it for you. Take my blood, it was poured out so that you might have life and have it to the full. This blood, this cup, is the symbol of the new covenant. It is the symbol of the depth of my love for you, it is the symbol of the commitment I am offering you.

This is the covenant I am inviting you into in these days, says the Lord. I will offer myself to you, fully and forever. I will forgive all the sins of your past. I will erase the memory of your unfaithfulness. I will take you into my heart and into my arms as one who is innocent and pure. I will caress away your fears and tenderly massage away the hurts and the scars you have suffered. I will kiss away the tears from your face and the pain of this world from your heart. I will restore your dignity and renew your integrity and your self-respect. Everything I am and everything I have I give to you, my chosen and precious people.

This is the covenant I am inviting you into in these days, says the Lord. I will put my law within you, and I shall write it on your hearts. Not a law of restrictions and rules, but the law of life – the law that keeps you safe within the bounds of love, joy and overflowing exuberant life. The law that enables you to reach the heights of joy and fulfillment and that guides you away from death and despair.

I will pour into your hearts my Holy Spirit and she will be a seal of my love and faithfulness to you. She will blossom forth and bear within you her fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness. You will be my greatest delight and treasure. You will be more precious to me than anything else on earth. I love you and I offer you this commitment, this covenant relationship, this promise of myself.

I will be your God and you will be my people, says the Lord. As you celebrate life together with one another, you are sharing together in the new covenant. I have called you, not only to be mine individually, but to be mine as a people. As my Holy Spirit begins to work in your hearts she will begin to reconcile you one to another and to bind you together as a covenant people. You will begin again to express for one another the sort of love and care and faithfulness I have expressed for you. My righteousness, my justice, my mercy and my love will be seen by all the world as it is lived out among you, my covenant people.

This is the covenant I am inviting you into in these days, says the Lord. You will know me intimately...

No longer will you need to teach one another, or say to each other "Know the Lord," for you shall all know me, from the least to the greatest. You who are nothing in the eyes of this world will enjoy a close intimate relationship with the creator of this world. You who are great in the eyes of this world can have the same but only the same, and you must accept these others as your brothers and sisters. No-one will have to show you the way to God. None of you will be left in the dark, groping for someone to take your hand and lead you to the light. For you will have unrestricted access to me, and the light of my love will lighten your way forever.

These are the things to come, says the Lord, they are now beginning and they will come to fulfillment. This is the covenant I am inviting you into in these days and this is the future that I am promising to you. I will blot out the memory of the evil and the pain and suffering of the past. I will forgive your mistakes and heal your wounds and we will be committed to one another in marriage, in a covenant relationship forever. I love you, I have chosen you, I want always and only the best for you. This is the new covenant sealed with my blood and my tears. Accept my promise, accept my commitment to you, accept the new covenant. And I will be your God and you will be my people, says the Lord.

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