

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
March 17, 2024

Jeremiah 31:31-34
A New Covenant

Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Our Sundays in Lent have focused on five covenants God made in the Old Testament and all of them came with visible signs. In the first one, God promised that when the clouds covered the earth and a rainbow was seen in the clouds, God would remember the covenant he made with Noah. Flood waters would never again destroy all flesh.

In the second covenant God made a promise that Abraham and Sarah would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. All families would be blessed through them. In the third covenant we received the gift of the Ten Commandments which established the laws we were all to follow. In the fourth covenant the throne of David was established forever. It is through his line that the Messiah came into the world.

Now we hear the final covenant in this series and God is speaking through the prophet Jeremiah. Rembrandt's famous painting titled *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* captures what most of us picture when we think of the biblical prophet. Jeremiah is quite forlorn. He leans his head on his hand and the background is dark. It is an image of abandoned hope. It is no wonder that Jeremiah is often referred to as the *Weeping Prophet*.

However, despite the nickname given to this prophet, we find in our reading for today a very different tone. We hear words that offer us comfort and hope and even optimism. As we near the end of Lent, we welcome these words of God that fill us with faith. God is making a new covenant with his people and that includes a most astonishing promise: God will forgive the iniquities of his people and will no longer remember their sins.

It is not the first time that we have heard this promise but we cannot hear it enough!

The prophet Isaiah shared the same message when he spoke on behalf of God and said: *I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.*

Hebrews 10 quotes these verses when it makes the case that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was a once-and-for-all sacrifice. Our sins and our lawless acts will not be remembered. There is no longer the need for us to make offerings for our sin. Jesus paid the price. Thanks be to God!

How wonderful to hear these words embedded in God's covenant. We know all of these covenants are one-sided and are not dependent on our good works but it should elicit some response from us. Every week we pray the Lord's Prayer that includes a petition asking God to forgive us as we forgive others. How serious should we take that second part? Because God forgives us and forgets our sins, does God really expect us to forgive and to forget the sins of others?

For some this is not just an academic question. Some have been hurt in ways that we would find beyond our comprehension.

Understanding the Hebrew words for *remember* and *forget* will help us with this dilemma. In English, our definition of *remember* focuses entirely on the idea of recalling memories while to *forget* is to fail to bring a certain memory to mind. We connect both of these words with some kind of mental activity.

The Hebrew verb *zakhar* (to remember) has a much wider definition than in the English. It focuses on the actions that are taken because of remembering. When we go back to that first covenant that God made with Noah, God acted on his promise. He saved Noah and his family and all of creation. God put a rainbow in the sky to remember the covenant God made that day. We are to focus on what God did and not just what God was thinking.

When we apply that same understanding to our lesson for today, God made a new covenant that was unlike the covenants that went before. The visible sign of this promise will not be external but written on our hearts. We are told that we will all have access to this amazing God. And the most comforting words of all follow when the Lord says:

I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

Let us now see how the Hebrew verb *shakach* (to forget) plays into this text. In Hebrew it means to ignore or to forsake. Once again the emphasis is on action rather than on mental activity. And because the focus is on action rather than the thought alone, it means that God does not lose his memory of our sins but rather God has decided to forego the punishment we deserve. Our sins are not erased from his memory. God chooses to put them aside, to ignore them and not bring them up again. Out of God's unconditional love for us, God chooses not to act in revenge for all the different ways we have erred against God and neighbor.

Knowing the Hebrew understanding of these two words is freeing in terms of what God expects of us. Often we struggle with a person who has hurt us repeatedly. We wonder whether forgiveness means we have to pretend that the person will not act the same way again. Are we allowed to protect ourselves, even if we hope and pray that the other will change?

The idea that we can decide not to remember the sins of others (in the Hebrew sense) simply means that we can let God be the final judge. For our part, we can remember in order to make a situation better. We can make wise decisions in the future that are healthy and good and right for us because they are grounded in our relationship with God who is so accessible to us that all we have to do is test our hearts.

Here is the truth: it is much more in God's realm to forego punishment than for us to do the same. We find it much more difficult if not impossible. When we forgive a person, we need to choose to put aside our grievances over and over again because our memory brings them back over and over again. It is also true if we find it difficult (if not impossible) to forgive ourselves.

Here is the greater truth: the more we love one another, the more we can put the past in perspective. It is the infinite and unconditional love of God that really does entirely remove our sins from his mind. Rather than treating our sins as we deserve, we hear in Psalm 103 how God removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west.

God cleanses us and then God moves on. God does not hold our sins over us. Instead, God sets us free to experience a new life.

Like the apostle Paul, we can forget (in the Hebrew sense) what is behind us and press forward towards Christ.

Our Lenten season ends with this astonishing promise of forgiveness. We started with Rembrandt's depiction of a forlorn Jeremiah who could hardly lift his head off of his hands. We leave with a depiction of God who heals, who forgives and restores a broken relationship, even if the fault for the break rests on us.

God accepts us freely and with a heavy dose of mercy. What makes the new covenant possible is what has always been true but needs to be stated again. God loves us with an everlasting love. It might be a new covenant but God's love is nothing new. Amen