

# An Astonishing Word of Hope

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman  
March 17-18, 2018  
Lent 5

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, though I was their husband, says the LORD. 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. 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.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)\*

When we bought our house almost 20 years ago, the inspector told us that the people who built it made good decisions. Many things about the house, which are not noticeable on the surface, such as wiring and plumbing, were well done. No short cuts were taken. Well, that was good to know! But, on the surface, there were things that I needed to change right away. There was a lot of pink!

One of the first decorative changes was the pink heart border in the kitchen. That had to go! Instead, I felt inspired to stencil herbs all along the top of the cabinets where the hearts had been. The herbs matched the herbs on some of the tiles below. It took a lot of attention to detail and hours of reaching to get those herbs up there. I wondered how Michelangelo did it? For a long time I enjoyed the peaceful plants as I remembered all of my work!

But as the years rolled on, I grew tired of those herbs. They seemed pale and uninteresting. So, not long ago, I covered them up with bold, dark cavern-gray paint. It looks much better! And I covered the herbed tiles with bright colors of patterned appliques from Mexico. There is a whole new vibe. And it wasn't that hard!

There are times we need a change. But not all change is easy; not all change is welcomed.

The prophet Jeremiah brought challenge to people who lived six-hundred years before Jesus. Jeremiah called for a change of direction, a change of heart. And after his pleading and pushing, he offered an astonishing word of hope.

Our lesson from Jeremiah 31 is, for many, well-known and well-loved. Jeremiah was a desperate and brazen prophet who was so out spoken with the kings, officials and people, they thought he was demented and almost killed him. He railed against the people who had rejected God's ways. They had forgotten their relationship with the

LORD and had substituted Divine *worship* for Divine *justice*. (Which is, we recall, *distributive*: caring for the alien, the widow and the orphan...making sure everyone in God's household has enough.)

In the time of political and social crisis with Babylon breathing down their necks, the Temple had become an idol. A rabbit's foot. Jeremiah told the people plainly: "Give it up. The Temple will not save you." And he was right. In 587 B.C. the Temple and Jerusalem fell. And the people were hauled off into exile.

We will remember that, centuries years, later Jesus followed in this prophetic tradition. The story we call the "cleansing of the Temple" was a demonstration against the leaders who had colluded with Rome. It was a demonstration against the same kind of idolatry. The Temple will not save you! (That temple fell in 70 A.D.)

So now, late in Lent, our lesson moves in a different direction. It is not a description of the problem or a prediction of the future. Instead, we are invited to open our imaginations to life in a new community. The Prophet's old words of new hope are not to be *applied* to our day but *submitted to* for a fresh view!

The words of promise and hope urge us to look—really look—to our practices of justice, our risks of compassion and our suffering for peace. Do we need to be bolder? More current? More real? (Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*)

Even a brief look at the news tells us we need this word of hope.

This past week there was a mass fleeing from Syria. Tens of thousands of terrified people fled on foot and in pickup trucks from bombings from the Syrian military. It was the largest single-day exodus of civilians from fighting in Syria's civil war. And a reminder of how the conflict that sparked the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe continues to hit new lows as it enters its eighth year. One doctor who fled after his clinic and house were destroyed said, "What choice do the people have? It is either death or exiting."

In our own country another political leader was ousted. With, some suspect, more to come. Students exited their classrooms to protest gun violence and plead for changes that will bring renewed peace and needed safety.

In Elgin people protest in front of the police station every day since the police shooting of a young black woman. The protestors say they will not stay home.

Primary battles wage on as candidates attack each other. Could they say more awful things?

A newly built pedestrian bridge collapses.

A puppy suffocates in an overhead airplane bin.

And an era ends as Toys "R" Us announces it is closing. Childhood does not last.

And Jeremiah thought Babylon was bad news!

But in the newspaper, there are ads to cheer us up. We can have our photo taken with the Easter bunny! Or we can make reservations for an “effortless Easter brunch.” Or we can change our lives with a DreamMaker® Kitchen or Bath remodel.

Bunnies and brunches, new baths don't really seem like much help, do they? The world needs more and so do we.

So, we gather to ask the big questions. What holds us together, what is our Center? Where do we hang our hope?

The old prophet had good news for the people: They have not been forgotten! The God of the covenant, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, is still their God. And there is hope.

Hope lies in forgiveness and in a new chance.

The prophet speaks the Word of the LORD: “I will write it on their hearts [*their inner selves!*]; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...they shall all know me...for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

The LORD of all suffers from self-imposed selective amnesia! God remembers the people and God's own desire for relationship. But God forgets their sin...their abandonment and rejection.

Divine amnesty invites us to join Divine agenda!

And this new chance is grounded in forgiveness. This means that the power of guilt, fear, and resentment evaporates, and we are free. What God has let go of, we no longer need carry as a burden.

The problem is that our actions toward each other are so irreversible. Our gestures, words and actions—whether done maliciously or carelessly—generate misunderstanding, distrust, hostility, alienation, and we live with it forever and ever.

Things only get worse as the years go on. A friend of mine told me that, years ago, when her father and his brother were young men, there were harsh words that no one even remembers, maybe not even the brothers! Both men died without reconciling. The whole family system was torn apart and has stayed that way.

Marriages stay frozen; parents and children are at deep odds. And among the nations! The great nations have so much for which to be forgiven by the little people, and the barbarity of race relationship goes on and on in its poison.

(Walter Brueggemann, *A Way Other Than Our Own*)

And we have our own idols. Like the people before us, we cling to institutions we hope will save us, such as the country and the church. But if our traditions are not called into question, they become our idols.

Father Rohr says that if you find that the Word of God has not placed a demand on you, challenged your life, *you have not heard it*. If it has not called you to lay down your life, to forget about yourself, *you have not heard it*. If it has not called you where you do not want to go, *you have not heard the voice of the prophet*. (Richard Rohr, *The Great Themes of Scripture: Old Testament*)

Our traditions and assumptions about life, God, and each other can be like armor or ammunition. But over the years we *have* changed more than the wallpaper at home or the banners at church. We *have* changed our minds and hearts. We have considered policies and practices and what it means to serve God's purposes, to participate in Divine justice. We have asked, who's in and who's out? We keep asking this!

Just in the past several decades, consider how much we have been urged to review, Related to gender, roles, and sexuality, nationalism and right use of power, and the stewardship of the earth.

Our confirmation students are amazed when I tell them that, when I was their age, we did not recycle! In the not-so-older days, a nice white Lutheran girl should never marry a Catholic boy... much less a person of color!

We submit to the prophet's old words of new hope for the sake our world and our lives in our practices of justice, our risks of compassion, and our suffering for peace.

Anne Lamott writes: "There's a lovely Hassidic story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put the scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, 'Why ON our hearts, and not IN them?' The rabbi answered, 'Only God can put the Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside.' " (Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*)

God calls people to life over and over again. To experience grace, mercy, acceptance and forgiveness. To live in this love, with this heart, means to live in grace, to be gracious and merciful to others. The Temple is not this building or the institution of the church. It is not even our treasured traditions.

The Temple—the place where God lives and works—is in the hearts and lives of a living and breathing community! In and through people—like you!—who are willing to have your own hearts broken to receive love that heals and restores. People who let go of the idols of self-sufficiency and the need to be right.

This new chance, this changing love, is the GOSPEL. It is not advice but assurance. And it is a gift.

Joan Chittister writes that the voice of Lent is a call to remember where we have come from and why. To become new again. To live on newly no matter what our life has been like until now. Lent is our salvation from the depths of nothingness. It is the guide to the more of life. (Joan Chittister, in *The Liturgical Year*)

We hang our hope in the God of the Covenant, the one of Steadfast Love, who gave us the prophets and, finally, Jesus, to show us what love looks like and for us to see and feel and live into what love can do.

There are times we need a change. But not all change is easy, not all change is welcome.

Easter bunnies and Easter brunches are nice, but not enough. The idols of our lives will not hold up.

We are part of the new Community, forgiven and set free.

Our hearts break open—for the sake of the world—and holy words fall inside.

We are turning, Lord, to hear you; you are merciful and kind, slow to anger, rich in blessing and with love to us inclined.

Amen.

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Resources

Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah and A Way Other than our Own*

Joan Chittister, in *The Liturgical Year*

*The Daily Herald*

Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*

Richard Rohr, *Great Themes of Scripture: Old Testament*

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