

“A New Chapter”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent V – March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

I know this has been a hard week for many of us, especially with the news I shared on Monday that Debbie and I will be moving to Raleigh, North Carolina, in May. A common response I have heard from many of you is that you're excited for us, but sad for the church. Even though we all knew that this day would come at some point, it is hard to believe it is real. Trust me – I most definitely feel that way myself, and both Debbie and I are filled with a myriad of emotions as we face this new chapter in our lives.

We are excited about this new opportunity for Debbie, as it just feels like something God is calling her to do next. It is a chance for her to serve as a chaplain to patients and staff, and to be an educator for chaplaincy students, without having to deal with all the administrative duties she currently has. And my wife is the last person who would welcome change – trust me! But despite that natural tendency, she and I feel God calling her to this new position – and that is something we are willing to follow even if it forces us to deal with our fear of change.

We are full of grief of leaving behind a city, a church, and a community which has been our home for eighteen years. I have never lived in any place longer in my forty-nine years of life than I have lived here in Indianapolis. Debbie's mother, brother, sister-in-law and other extended family are here in Central Indiana. We raised our daughters here – actually, a more apt description is we, this church, and this community raised our daughters here. We have forged strong friendships in this place who have supported us in both good and hard times. We will be leaving all of that behind, and while modern technology and social media provide ways to stay connected that were not possible in the past, they do not offer a substitute for being with one another in-person through the day-to-day rhythms of life.

We are nervous and excited about what lies ahead – we've coined a new word for this feeling: “nervcited.” We are going to a place that we do not have lots of established family or friends in the immediate area, and we know it will take time to build those relationships. I am leaving my ministry here with you without yet having something new in place – for the first time in twenty-two years, I will not be employed full-time. I am actively listening for what God will call me to next, while putting all of my current energy into finishing well with you and helping us make this move as smoothly as we can. And we're doing all of this while we still have two children in college full-time.

At this point, some of you may be asking, “Then why in the world are you moving?!” The answer is: it’s time. Now that the girls are out of high school, it was the proper time to start listening more intensely to God’s Spirit and see if we were being called to something new. The last eighteen years have been full, fruitful, and I feel like I have completed the work I was called to do with you as partners in ministry. I believe you’re ready for God to speak through a new, fresh voice in leadership, to help lead you through the next chapter in your life as a church. And Debbie and I believe we are ready for God to lead us into that next chapter of our lives, carrying with us all that we have loved and treasured about our ministry here at John Knox for the past eighteen years.

One of the great strengths of this congregation has been its long-tenured staff. I am the second-longest serving senior pastor in the church’s nearly sixty years of ministry, and third-longest serving pastor. We have had long-serving educators, secretaries, musicians, and others who have served this congregation. Not to mention the long-standing commitment so many members have had to this church through the years. That speaks to the healthy environment for ministry which is present at John Knox, and the deep love and care you show to those who come here to serve in Christ’s name. It is also why changes like this are so hard, because it’s not just the years we’ve been together, but the shared experiences we have had that cause us to feel such sadness and pain knowing those will now come to an end.

Transition, change, uncertainty – these are not only feelings we are experiencing for our particular situation at John Knox, those words also describe our journey through the Lenten Season this year. Next week, we will enter the holy city of Jerusalem with Jesus and his disciples, and what awaits us is upheaval, pain, and loss. We are living through a continuing time of disconnection with one another due to the pandemic, and there is great pain and loss as we endure this time. We are shocked, saddened and horrified by the senseless killings of innocent people in Atlanta, Indianapolis, and elsewhere. We are all living through times that make us wonder where God is amid the turmoil which surrounds us.

Perhaps in our scripture lesson today we are given the hope we need to hear that God is always with us, no matter how distant we feel God may be. The Book of Jeremiah is unique in that it spans the time period before, during, and after the exile of the Israelites into Babylon in 587 BCE. This passage that we have read today was likely written while Jeremiah remained behind, but the prophet certainly was impacted by witnessing his people experience pain, suffering, and anxiety in the midst of a deep crisis. For Jeremiah, it is a crisis of their own doing: it was the Israelites who broke God’s law after “I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant they broke.”

And yet, despite their unfaithfulness and sinfulness, God would not abandon them, would not forsake them. God would do something that

was of God's own doing – not of his own people's doing – and it would be new and full of hope and promise. It would not be a law written on stone tablets, written on pieces of paper, written in words that can easily be forgotten or ignored or rationalized out of. No, it would be a law that is literally “put within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” It will be a covenant grounded in grace, forgiveness, and love – not romantic love, but agape love, sacrificial love, deep, transformational love. It will be evident by their actions towards the least to the greatest, for they will all know the Lord. It will be a covenant that, as we say in the communion liturgy, is “sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sins.”

Stacey Elizabeth Simpson writes: *Think of tattoos or brands. They are more or less permanent. Whatever symbol a person chooses says something about him or her. That's why tattoos and brands are chosen in the first place – as a mark of identity. Pain, indelibility, identity. These are the central aspects of what it means to be marked. If it didn't involve pain, it wouldn't be indelible: marks that don't hurt are the ones that wash off.*

Pain, indelibility, and identity are also the hallmarks of God writing the covenant on the heart of the people. This is chiefly a consoling passage, but the pain of God inscribing himself into souls must not be romanticized. God is invading the heart. Yes, this will make them God's people, but it also will mean a death of the self, and a radical transfer of allegiance from all systems and claims. This is not the people overcoming their sinful natures; this is God overcoming the people.

The covenant brands us as “God's people.” It is an internal identity that will be evidenced by external behavior. We will live God's law not because we are obliged to but because we want to, because our hearts are shaped that way (“Branded by God,” Christian Century, October 18, 2000: 1035).

We will live God's law because we want to, because our hearts are shaped that way.

The prophet reminds us today that we have the indelible mark of God written on our hearts, a mark which brands us as God's beloved children. No matter what we live through – the joy of new life, the sorrow of death, the challenge of racism, the unsettledness of change – that mark does not go away. The covenant of God strengthens us, comforts us, and empowers us to live through all that life throws at us, and show others the depth of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. God's covenant also gives us the ability to see from a perspective of hope and promise, even if that is not our first response.

One of the other reactions I have experienced to the news that Debbie and I will be leaving is fear. Fear of how the church will face this time of transition. Fear that people will leave, that support will fade away, that things may fall apart. Fear that things will be like twenty years ago, when the church faced a similar interim period between the retirement of Roger Dean and my arrival as pastor. It is natural to be afraid of change

- I have felt that emotion myself as we have walked this road of discernment. But if we remain in that fearful mindset, we may miss what God is intending to do through this new chapter for both of us.

What if the indelible mark of God that is written on our hearts allows us to leave behind our fear, and instead embrace the future with hope, expectation, and faith? What if we see this new chapter laid before us as an opportunity for God to work in, around, and through us, so that we may grow deeper in our faith and as servants of Christ in this community?

I want to speak directly to the fear some of you have expressed about the transition to come. Many have said how hard, how painful, how difficult the last interim time was between Dr. Dean and myself. I have said it throughout my time here, and I will say it again: I would not have been here for as long as I have been if you had not done all the work you did during that interim. It was necessary, it was important, and it was fruitful - an eighteen-year pastorate following a thirty-year pastorate is extraordinary for churches.

Which is why it is so important to not see this transitional time and the interim pastor between my leaving and your next installed pastor coming as a time to dread. See this as an opportunity to look at yourself in a fresh way, to ask questions of one another, to dream about what God is calling you to do next. Our community continues to experience significant changes - use this time to intentionally learn more about our neighbors, what they need and yearn for in life, and how God might be calling you to serve our neighbors in the years ahead. You've been great about trying new things during our time here - keep that mindset and attitude, and realize that that is healthy and attractive to new people.

If you do that hard work, if you approach this time with hope and faith, if you realize that God is with you through the indelible mark that is written on your hearts - then you will have done what is necessary to prepare the way for your next installed pastor, and who knows - maybe that person will be here another eighteen years!

I will have more to share over the coming weeks before I complete my ministry with you on May 16. For now, may we be open to God's Spirit leading us into this new chapter in our collective lives, trusting that we are never separated from God's love which is embodied in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.