

COVENANT

TEXT: Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Hebrews 8:6-13

As most of you know, I spent most of the week of March 5 at Swedish Hospital in Seattle, following back surgery very early Monday morning. As I still have my apartment on Capital Hill, I traveled up Sunday evening rather than risk the Monday morning traffic to meet a 5:40 am check-in at the hospital. When I make that long drive, my mind often works on my upcoming sermon. And, every once in a while, I get an unexpected dose of inspiration. This was a case in point.

About the time I got to Satsop I looked to my right and saw a bright and beautiful rainbow. And, lo and behold, there was a second rainbow beside it – a double dose of God’s glory. It brought to mind a couple of verses from Genesis which are printed on the insert in your bulletin. *And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations. I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth”.* (Genesis 9:12-13) What a great opening to a discussion of Covenants. God is saying that God’s covenant is between God and every living creature, for all future generations! That covers everything, from the birds of the air, the fish in the sea, and everything that has life on the face of the earth – yes, even the mosquitos! That’s pretty amazing! But God also said it covers God and the Earth – that means the sea, the land, the vegetation. God has made everything that exists in our world, and everything that God has made is sacred and is included in God’s covenant. There are NO exceptions (so there – Westboro Baptist Church!).

Well, since we are talking about Covenants, it might be appropriate to understand what the Bible means by the word “covenant”. A covenant is an agreement; usually between two parties. In the ancient Near East, it was a kind of treaty by means of which rulers entered into a covenant relationship with their subjects. There are certain similarities in style between these secular covenants and the biblical covenants, but the content is surely different.

So, what are the covenants that God has made? Well, there were several: God's Covenant with Adam regarding care of God's creation (and a second regarding "original sin"), the covenant with Noah, the Abrahamic Covenant, and most notably the Mosaic Covenant, which includes the Ten Commandments. There are a couple of others, but these are the "biggies". Our lesson from the Prophet Jeremiah tells us that there will be a New Covenant, one that will pierce the grueling night of a shattered people.

Jeremiah lived during the darkest days of the nation. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been defeated and dispersed abroad by the Assyrians. This was God's judgment for her many sins. The southern kingdom of Judah had not learned from the experiences of her sister Israel. She, too, had persisted in her sins and thus the prophesied Babylonian captivity drew near. Already some of the Jews had been deported to Babylon. Jeremiah foretold seventy years of captivity, during which the land would receive its rest. But he prophesied that after this, there was hope for restoration. Both Israel and Judah would be restored and forgiven, not on the basis of the Old, Mosaic Covenant, but on the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant. The promises of the New Covenant are then spelled out in the reading we just heard from Jeremiah:

"Indeed, a time is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I delivered them from Egypt. For they violated that covenant, even though I was like a faithful husband to them". "But I will make a new covenant with the whole nation of Israel after I plant them back in the land. I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts and minds. I will be their God and they will be my people. People will no longer need to teach their neighbors and relatives to know me. For all of them, from the least important to the most important, will know me. For I will forgive their sin and will no longer call to mind the wrong they have done."

And it gets even better: The Lord promises to re-gather God's people from all the countries where they had been exiled. The Lord will bring them back and allow them to live in safety. "They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will make a lasting

covenant with them that I will never stop doing good to them. I will fill their hearts and minds with respect for me so that they will never again turn away from me.”

I don't know about you, but I think that was a pretty good deal for the Israelites. Not only did The Lord promise all these good things, but all God wanted in return was for the people to love and obey God. God had forgiven their sins, released their debts. They would now discover the liberating realization of the promised new covenant knowledge of the forgiving God.

So, we turn to the reading from Hebrews. What has changed since the days of Jeremiah (650 BC) to the writings to the Hebrews (63-64 AD)?

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Christ has provided a Covenant that is more excellent than the old. It is enacted on better promises. He says “The days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people... I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more”.

Walter Brueggemann identifies a number of elements to the new covenant. First, there will be a new “solidarity”: the separation occasioned by Israel and Judah's sin will be overcome and God will identify himself as their God and them as his people. By implication, the division within the kingdom itself will end and Israel and Judah will once again be united as a single people. Second, there will be a new knowledge of God, of God's saving tradition, and to obedience to God's commands for justice. There will be a new loyalty and obedience to God. Third, this new relationship will no longer be characterized by intermediation and the distance that maintained between God and the majority of the people. Middle men with privileged access and knowledge, brokering relations between God and God's people will no longer be necessary. From the poorest to the richest, the youngest to the oldest, all will enjoy access to God and be acquainted with God's truth.

All these elements of the new covenant relationship are founded upon a great act of divine initiative which breaks the vicious cycle of sin and punishment within which Israel had become trapped and opens a new page for the people of Israel.

And it opens a new page for us as well. No longer do we need to feel the stigma of God's wrath for our failures and imperfections. Our God has promised that God will not remember our sins and past transgressions. God forever will make us new creatures. And we have become these new creatures through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Today we celebrate the Lord's Table. We celebrate what God has done through Christ and His priestly ministry of the New Covenant. When Jesus took the cup after the meal, he said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood,"

In New Testament times, The Lord's Supper was actually a supper; it was partaken in the context of a full meal. Sharing a meal around a table was one of the most intimate forms of fellowship in that culture (and in most others). So as we gather for the meal, and the symbols, we are celebrating our unity in the person of Jesus Christ and his Covenant with us.'

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul asks us: "Is not the cup of blessing that we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread that we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all share the one bread."

We have entered into the promised blessings of the New Covenant – the forgiveness of sins, the blessing of a new heart, and the joy of drawing near to God in Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen