

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

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5th Sunday in Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.³²It 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.³³But 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.³⁴No 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.

John 12:20-33

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

“Where? Down In My Heart!”

April 15th, oh it is getting closer and closer. Better get those taxes done. Every year I tell myself that the task will be completed early. But alas, it is almost the end of the month and Uncle Sam is still waiting for his paperwork from me. I still have more than a couple dozen days.

You can read the tax code—its volume upon volume. You can take your paperwork to a preparer, but there is no guarantee that they really know what they are doing. You can buy one of the many software packages that will help you prepare your own tax forms right in the comfort of your computer work station. There are plenty of options, and there are oodles and oodles of rules, regulations, and laws to follow.

Educated professionals, legal code, software helps—all of it provides a means for wadding through the precision that is needed in order to fairly and accurately file your federal and state tax returns. If you have not yet started, you had better get busy!

In order to do your taxes you really do have to know well the laws. I’m sure all of us have seen those news clips that show the reporter with the tax code and it is a stack of volumes too high for a strong man to even lift.

Whether you understand or don’t understand the tax laws is not consequential. Whether you comprehend or don’t comprehend the tax laws does not matter either. No matter what, you are held accountable and liable for it. In other words, ignorance is no excuse. You still have to have it right.

The same might be said of the driving laws. You can only go so fast, if you go faster you run the risk of being stopped and being given a ticket.

If you are stopped going 40 miles per hour on Joppa Farm Road, you cannot say to the officer, “Oh I did not know the speed limit was 30, I thought it was 40.” That is not how it works. You are responsible for paying attention to the signs and then being obedient to them. Ignorance is not bliss. You will drive away owing a fine and get a few points too.

Law. What is the role of law? It provides order. The chaos of creation is ordered by natural law. The disobedience of humanity is ordered in the covenant of Abraham and by the stone tablets that Moses bears as he descends from the mountain of God.

When we encounter Jeremiah, the Babylonians have torn down the temple in Jerusalem and have dragged King Zedekiah off in chains. All the symbols of covenant have been destroyed and the people faced a crisis of magnitude. Here they had lost power and prestige; they had lost freedom and security. All was lost. Including God—with all the symbols of the covenant fully destroyed and people literally hauled off they were left with the question of where is God? Where is God in all that loss? Where is God at such a time as this?

Here they were raising questions about God’s fidelity to them. Not only were they left without temple and homeland, but the suffering and pain of living alone was enough for them (and us too) to raise the questions about God’s fidelity and faithfulness to God’s people.

The wonder of what Jeremiah writes here in his prophecy addresses these issues specifically and with a view that gives some real perspective that is revolutionary to the hearers of this original prophecy. Jeremiah’s assertion is that the problem is not with God’s fidelity; rather the problem is with the fidelity of the people.

His view is dependent upon his understanding of covenant. God made covenant with Abraham and with all his descendents. That covenant was intact. It was not dependent upon what people did or how they responded to it. It was God's commitment. And God offered the people an opportunity to respond to that commitment by faithfulness and fidelity to the law. Hence the stone tablets of Moses.

Jeremiah's proclamation has more to do with the fact that the people have not lived up to that covenant. Up until this point in the book of Jeremiah it is very gloom and doom. All along Jeremiah has been wailing and smashing pots, trying to get the people to see that their idolatrous ways will lead to God's judgment. His view is that the destruction of the temple and the exile are evidence of that judgment.

But now the gloom and doom prophet turns to the good news. And his good news is directly in the face of all the disorder and destruction that the people face. Even right there and even right then God's covenant fidelity is completely together – it is without question. There is no spot or blemish on it.

Yet that is not enough, now God says that God is about to establish a new covenant and this covenant will be unlike the old one in that this one will be written on the hearts. "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."

It is a movement from external law to internal. It is a movement from law written on stone tablets to law that is internalized. Written on the heart is a way of saying that is in each person as part of the very fabric of their being.

Do you remember the old Sunday School Song: “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart. Down in my heart. Down in my heart. I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart. Down in my heart to stay.”

I submit that what we discover down in our hearts is this new covenant law of God that is written on each of our hearts. I want you to think about that which is written on your heart and about your life this morning by considering three questions?

One: How do you get the law of God written on your heart? How do you get the law of God written on your heart?

The law of God, or the covenant of God, or even call it the presence of God—it is there. It is part of your being created. It is part of the “Imago Dei”—your being created in the image of God. You don’t choose it or write it yourself. God places it there. In you. Inside of you is this part of you that yearns and longs for the presence of God, and that very presence is part and parcel of you and your created being.

It is that third person of the trinity. The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells within your being. Quite literally your body is the temple of God—it is the place where God lives. God’s spirit and your spirit dwell—co-habitat, if you will. God inhabits you; God resides in you.

So the law of God is powerfully there in you, on your heart. Not of your doing, or even of your action or invitation. God’s love is such that God lives in you—so loves you that God will indwell in your begin....or as the prophet puts it “writes the law of God on your heart.”

How do you get the law written on your heart? You claim it because the initiative of God is already there, already inside of you yearning for you

to come to recognize and live into that holy presence that is so much a part of you. It is there. The sovereign God has claimed you.

Two: So given that the law of God is written on your heart and written on my heart, ...given that it is written on all our hearts, then what does it say? What does the law of God say?

And the answer to that question is a really deep answer. I can tell you what I understand that law to say and the great theologians and the local ones too will tell you what that law says. Certainly our pages of Scripture tell us what is the content of that law of God within our hearts.

But that cannot be just an academic learning. We can study scripture and we can study theology, and we can go to a Bible class every night of the week, but that does not mean that we know what God's law is on our heart.

See here, I think this where the prophet is coming from. He does not tell us that the Lord told him that God would write God's law on our minds. No he tells us it is written on the heart. Why the heart?

"I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Down in my heart. Down in my heart. I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Down in my heart to stay."

Why the heart? Because this is not surface stuff. This law of God is deep. It goes beyond thought right to the heart of the matter—words chosen on purpose here. This law of God goes right to the heart of who we are and who God is and how that calls us to be in relationship with God and each other. And such is something that is discerned in quiet reflection and listening for God in our lives.

We can give each other the broad strokes and share how God is moving in our corporate lives, but God is also writing on your heart. God is writing on your own individual heart and you have to discern that. To discern what that law says we each have to get quiet enough to listen.

So in worship we are trying to open ourselves to how God is speaking—that is why we start each worship in reflection with quiet and music and candles—it is to get us into that place where we are listening to what is going on inside of our lives and inside of our hearts. God is speaking. God is moving. God is there.

And if we are to hear what God is saying we have to be quiet enough for us to really hear—not only on Sunday mornings, but each day.

John plays this out in the life of Jesus. As we encounter Jesus in this passage from Chapter 12 of John's Gospel. Jesus hears God's call on his life. Jesus knows what God is saying. Notice that when Jesus says that the hour has come, and that the Father's name is to be glorified, then there is a voice from heaven.

Jesus says, "Father glorify your name." The voice from beyond says, "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again." This is John's gospel. In the synoptics we hear that voice at the baptism of Jesus. Not in John. This is the first time such an occurrence takes place.

But notice the detail—does the crowd hear what the voice says? No. They think it is perhaps thunder. Does Jesus hear? Yes. Why? Because he has been quiet enough and has sought God on a deep enough level in order to be in touch with and in tune with what God is saying in his life.

There is a spiritual openness and a discernment that Jesus constantly comes back to. Such is the "Down in my heart" nature of God as God dwells in us. We have to get deep enough and quiet enough in order to listen for it.

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Three: So if we have to be quiet to hear what God is saying to us, okay, then what is God who writes God's law on our hearts calling us to do? What is God calling us to do?

It really comes to the heart of John's understanding of the role of crucifixion. Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

For John there is no doctrine of substitutionary atonement. There really is not a view of atonement. John's view of crucifixion is particular and significant. It judges the world and drives out the ruler of the world.

Let me say that again: for John the crucifixion judges the "world" and drives out the "ruler of the world."

John's view of the world is not the goodness of creation. John's view of the world is rather the fallen realm that exists in estrangement from God. It is that which is opposed to God's purposes. John would call the "ruler of the world" those powers and principalities that are characterized by ways of domination, destruction, violence, and death. Such rulers of the world are put down in the crucifixion. Their power is seen for what it is—as limited by the overwhelming power of God to bring life out of creation.

The "no" of the world is squelched by the "yes" of God. The "no" of the world is put down by the "yes" of the one who dies and is risen.

All those things that are opposed to God's purpose are put down and judged—those systems of consumerism, hierarchy, classism, racism, sexism, violence, and all the isms are cast out by means of the cross.

In their being cast out our hearts are drawn to the one who casts them out in his lifted up self.

So we see in the Christ of God the content of what God's law written on our hearts calls us to do. It calls us to be partners in the purpose of God to "cast out" the world.

Law provides order – the cross of Christ orders our world and that new order is written on our hearts. It is an order of life and world and heart where violence and destruction are not the rulers of the our world – rather, the ruler of the life that really is and the life that really counts is the one lifted up in pure love that never stops.

What are we called to do? What is our heart saying? What is the God who writes on our hearts calling us to do?

To live a new, alternative way of life in the midst of a violent world. Listen. The hour is at hand and where is the way of God? "Down in your heart to stay." Amen.