

Homily for Reformation, 2020

Jeremiah 31:31-34

'The new covenant'

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TEXT – Jeremiah 31:31-34

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. 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.

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INTRODUCTION

For our commemoration of the Reformation this year,

We're going to look at this wonderful prophecy in Jeremiah of the **'new covenant'**.

And we'll look at four main aspects of this today.

It's **promise**,

It's **basis**,

It's **nature**,

and it's **goal**.

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PROMISE OF THE NEW COVENANT

So first is the **promise** of the new covenant.

Throughout the Bible,
God relates to people through covenants.

So what is a covenant?

Well think about two types of bonds we have in our life.

The first one is a contract.

A legally binding agreement,
For the exchange of goods or services,
with written stipulations.

A contract.

But then think of another type of bond,
Like a friendship.

These are different,
They aren't formal or legal arrangements,

But are built on Mutual interests,
enjoying each other's company,

And to go deeper,
Things like trust, loyalty and love.

Well,
What if you brought those two types of bonds together?

A bond which is characterised **both** by a relationship of love and faithfulness,

But which also has a more formal, even legal dimension,
With requirements actually written down and agreed to?

If you can get that picture,
You're very close to what the Bible describes as a **covenant**.

And as our text reminds us,
We do have something like this in our everyday life,

Which is marriage.

Throughout the Bible marriage between a man and a woman is compared to the covenant relationship God makes with his people.

And what's so amazing about this comparison,
is that in marriage you have this bond,

This covenant,
Being made between two equals,
Man and woman,

Whereas what's described in the Bible is that the **Lord God himself**,
The creator of this universe,

Himself takes the initiative and enters into covenant relationship with his people.

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So in our text now,
why the need to promise a new covenant?

It's very significant that this promise comes in the middle of the book of **Jeremiah**.

If you've ever read through the whole book of Jeremiah,
You may recall it's pretty hard going.

Jeremiah is sometimes called the prophet of doom,

Not because he was a cranky, pessimistic guy by temperament,

But just because he was called by God to deliver, largely, a message of rebuke and judgment.

God had made his covenant at Mt Sinai with the people,
They had agreed to it and said all this we will do,

But they broke the covenant again and again and again,

They refused to listen,
They refused to repent,

And so they suffered the consequences,

The Temple was destroyed,

The people were carried off into captivity.

This is the focus of Jeremiah's preaching.

But then out of all this darkness,
comes a bursting ray of light in the form of a wonderful promise:

*'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.'*

Just imagine these people reading this later on,

Sitting in Babylon,
Their city and their religious life and their community being utterly desolated,

What hope could there be for the future?

They had nothing in themselves that was the cause for any hope,

But then they read these words,

The Lord says '**I will make** a new covenant'.

I will intervene,
I will act,
I will restore my people to myself.

The promise of the new covenant shows very simply,
That...

God did not give up on his people,

God was not finished with them.

And it's this commitment of the Lord,

that has given the people of God confidence then in every generation.

For example,
at the time of the Reformation,

There were so many problems in the Church and it seemed at times overwhelming and insurmountable,

And yet God was not finished with his people,

He brought reformation,
Renewal,
New life.

Still today in our Church,
Still today in your life,

God does not give up on us,

He can bring about newness and renewal,
Even when all seems lost.

There's the **promise** of a new covenant.

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THE BASIS OF THE NEW COVENANT

Next, there is the **basis**, the *foundation*, the *source* of this new covenant.

You only get to the basis in the very last line where you need to notice that little word 'for'
or 'because',

Why is the rest of this the case?

'for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more' (v 34).

It's all based on the forgiveness of God.

And notice how this forgiveness is described here,
'I will remember their sin no more'.

One of the reasons this is such a powerful description of God's forgiveness,
Is that it's exactly what we find so hard to do, don't we?

We forgive,
Or we try to forgive,

But we **remember** the sin.

We wait for that opportunity in the future when something comes up that we don't like and
we **remind** them of it,
Or we act towards them on the basis of that previous offense.

That's what we do don't we?

But the promise of the new covenant God makes,

Is that of God it can truly be said,
he forgives and forgets.

He does not hold your sin against you when he forgives it,

He casts it into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7)

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Now in the promise of Jeremiah,
It's left unsaid how exactly God will bring this about.

And then hundred and hundreds of years later,

Jesus of Nazareth reclined at table with his disciples,
Takes the cup,
And says,

*'This is my blood of the new covenant,
Poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins...'* (Matt 26:28)

Jesus ushers in the new covenant.

As he lays down his life for you as the once for all sacrifice,
As he sheds his blood for you,
As he goes to the cross and rises again from the dead,

He brings about this forgiveness of sins.

And every time you come to the Lord's Supper,

You receive it anew,
You are assured that you belong to the Lord as part of his covenant people.

He is your God,
You are his people.

The forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus is the basis of the new covenant.

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And this is one of the reasons, surely, we read this text on Reformation.

Because a part of the story of the Reformation is that this truth had become obscured in various ways.

But the chief concern of Reformation Christians,

It's that this is the basis,
what God has done for us in Christ Jesus rather than anything we do for God,

everything else can only flow from this source,

or to switch metaphors,
Everything else can only be built on this foundation.

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THE NATURE OF THE NEW COVENANT

So there was the **promise** of the new covenant,
Then the **basis** of the new covenant,
Next, there is the **nature** of the new covenant.

In other words,
What was this new covenant to entail,
To be like?

The text says,
'...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.'

So the big focus here of the new covenant is that God is going to do something **inside** his people,

Putting his law within us,
Writing it in our hearts,
Our innermost being.

The contrast seems to be with how God gave the law and commandments to the people at Mt Sinai,

Remember it was written on tablets of stone,

And those tablets of the ten commandments were to be kept in the ark of the covenant.

But now in this new covenant the focus of the writing down of God's law is not stone or paper,
But inside of people,
It's quite remarkable!

And the point of this doesn't seem to be just that people can have some innate **knowledge** of God's law,

There's a sense in which this is already the case in every human being,
St Paul talks about this in Romans 2.

But the point of **this** promise is in contrast to the people's **unwillingness** and **inability** to keep God's law,

And as God inscribes his law, his will, you could say,
Inside people,

This will actually lead to them wanting to do what God wants.

It makes me think of how parents have conversations about their children as they grow,
trying to help children learn to live according to the rules of the household.

The first step is,
In a sense,
To just try to get the children to do what they're told.

And if you can get children to stop hitting each other,
Taking things when they shouldn't,
Helping out with some chores,
Etc,

That's a good first step.

But then when there's those moments to reflect,
Parents will sometimes say to each other,

Now, how we do get our children to the point,
Where they actually **want** to stop arguing, hitting and taking stuff,

How do we help them grow into people who actually **want** to help each other?

Because that's a whole different dynamic.

Controlling external behaviour is one thing,

Getting new desires and movements of the heart is another.

This is what God will do for his people in the new covenant he says.

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To be made God's own in the new covenant,
Is to have the Spirit's work of forming and shaping you from the inside out,
to delight in God's will,
to walk in his ways,
to the glory of his holy name.

This is, I would suggest,
Especially important for us as Reformation Christians to keep in mind.

Because one of the criticisms of the Reformation and our Christian tradition,

Is that in the great re-discovery of the centrality of the gift of God's grace to us in Christ
Jesus received through faith,

The criticism and the concern is that we don't take seriously the life that is to flow from such
faith,

The life of love and good works.

But the reformers themselves took this very seriously,

I'll just finish this point with a quote from our Lutheran Confessions on this before we move
on:

They said,
'... we are to keep the Law when we have been justified by faith, and so grow in fulfilling the Law more and more by the Spirit... Faith brings the Holy Spirit and produces a new life in hearts. It must also produce spiritual movements in hearts. The prophet Jeremiah shows what these movements are when he says, 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts' (Jer 31:33). Apology, V, III, 4/125

The nature of the new covenant is a people who are in Christ,
living according to God's will,
shaped by the work of the Holy Spirit within them.

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THE GOAL OF THE NEW COVENANT

The *promise*,
The *basis*,
The *nature*,
And finally, very briefly,
The **goal**.

As you know I usually stick with three points,

But I just couldn't leave this out,

Don't miss the **goal** of the new covenant:

Because as important as forgiveness is, it's not the goal.

As important as living according to God's will is from the inside out,
Even that is not the final goal.

The final goal,
Is God himself,
To know God.

'No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD', 'they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest...'

It's knowing God,
That's the goal.
Think again of the marriage analogy.

There is a lot that goes into,
Prepare for,
And brings about human marriage.

There is a formal ceremony,
And even paperwork to be done.

Couple discuss how they will live together in very practical ways.

All this is necessary and important.

But what's the pint of it all?

There are different ways you could answer that question,

But one would be to say,
All of this is about bringing two people together to truly **know** each other,

And the covenant God makes with us is the same.

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Now this part of the text can sound mysterious as it seems to say there will be no need for teaching at all in the new covenant,
Whereas Jesus and the Apostles say over and over there is still a need for teaching in the Christian church.

But the knowing and teaching here doesn't seem to be so much about teaching **information** and knowing **about** God,

But it's about knowing in the sense of being in relationship,
About teaching in the sense of *meditating* that relationship.

There is in the new covenant only one mediator between God and human beings,
Christ Jesus himself,

There are still teachers like pastors,

But your pastors are no closer to God than you,

We have no special access,
No special knowledge of God - in the sense of the covenant relationship - than any other Christian,
From the least to the greatest.

This is the goal,
That because of Christ Jesus and the forgiveness of sins he brings,
And as you begin to live according to God's will by the Spirit-worked will of God inside of you,

You come finally to truly know God.

Now this doesn't mean it's completely in this life,

St Paul reminds us that now we know only in part,

But then,
Then,
In the life of the world to come,

Then we will know fully,
Then we will see not dimly as in a mirror,
But face to face.

This is the goal,
Never lose sight of it.

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CONCLUSION

This Reformation we've looked closely at this wonderful prophecy of the ***new covenant***,
In which you who are in Christ now live.

If you've never known this God,
He's inviting you to know him.

If you've walked away from this covenant,
He hasn't,
And he's waiting for you with open arms.

If you do know this God,
Enjoy it!

The new covenant,

There was the promise,
The basis,
The nature,
And the goal.

God grant it to us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.