

Sermon 24.03.17

Kate Heinzl, pastor UMC

Psalm 51: 1-12

A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Jeremiah 31:27-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. In those days they shall no longer say:

'The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge.'

But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

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.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

'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. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

This Morning (by Mary Oliver)

This morning the redbirds' eggs
have hatched and already the chicks
are chirping for food. They don't
know where it's coming from, they
just keep shouting, "More! More!"
As to anything else, they haven't
had a single thought. Their eyes
haven't yet opened, they know nothing
about the sky that's waiting. Or
the thousands, the millions of trees.
They don't even know they have wings.
And just like that, like a simple
neighborhood event, a miracle is
taking place.

Confession assurance:

A brother asked Abba Sisoos, "What shall I do, Abba, for I sinned and have fallen?" The old man said to him, "Get up." The brother said, "I have got up, but I have fallen again." "Get up again," said Abba Siseos. The brother said, "I have got up again, but I have fallen again." The old man said, "No matter how many times you fall, you must get up again and again. Never fall without getting up."

Sermon:

Law and covenant. We're going to explore these a bit today.
And the heart - this seat of emotional and intellectual intelligence.

Law and covenant.

Does the word law make you a little uneasy?

Story:

I found myself in the Centre County courtroom in Bellefonte this week as one who came to witness - to see and be seen. It was both beautiful and Underwhelming. The law part was underwhelming. The heart part - the showing up with about 50 other people to bear witness and ask for justice - that was the beautiful part.

The court proceedings were not like on TV - it wasn't a trial, or even a hearing, but a status conference, as the Centre County DA was seeking to dismiss an upcoming hearing scheduled in May to consider newly discovered evidence proving the innocence of Subu Vedam, a man of Indian descent who was convicted of murder here in our county, at the age of 18, over 40 years ago, and who continues to claim his innocence. Over 40 years in jail - and now the defense is calling for a retrial and true justice to be served. The judge listened to both sides, who used lots of legal jargon and referred to various laws then he shuffled his papers, stood up (he didn't even rap his gavel to end the proceedings) and left. No judgment; no indication of next steps. Those of us unfamiliar with court proceedings, especially a status conference, were confused. What just happened? We expected an answer. Wasn't this a court of law?

Law; covenant. What's the difference?

A covenant is an agreement of mutual obligation, or commitment, in which each party has the ability and responsibility to uphold his or her side.¹

The Bible uses the same word for covenant regardless of whether that agreement is between God and God's people, or between people.

Laws are mostly transactional in nature - do this; don't do that. Covenants are relational - all involved have responsibilities to uphold.

We just covenanted with Emily and Mason - named our responsibility in helping them raise Arlo to know God through the love of this community. We said 'we'll be here, standing with you as those who seek Christ, as you figure out what it means to parent and love him. We join you in this work.'

Covenants. Laws. Our scriptures are full of them, and even if some of the ancient laws sound bizarre or down right wrong to our contemporary ears, God's faithfulness and love can be seen through their

¹ <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/covenant-and-law-matter-relationship>

diversity, and how these laws moved from conditional laws, where people were required to comply or suffer the consequences, to unconditional laws, which, instead of being inscribed on a tablet of stone, God chose to write on the hearts of God's people. Love written on our hearts.

Our psalm today begins with a cry for mercy and steadfast love. The Hebrew word *hesed*, translated as “steadfast love,” refers to the covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel. God has promised to be theirs, and they have promised to be God's; **the covenant is a mutual promise to “be for” each other.**²

Steadfast love, *hesed*, a covenant of love and promise to be for one another.

In the passage from Jeremiah, God promises to “cut a new covenant.” But what's “new” about it won't be its content; this is not a new law, but rather **a new ability**, on humanity's part, to follow the law, and in that sense a new way of being with the Holy One.³

What will be “new” (or renewed) will be the inner life of human beings: God will write the law within us, such that knowing God will be second nature.

Jeremiah reminds the people that the covenant is not about stone tablets but about relationship with God. With the stone tablets gone due to the destruction of the temple, the covenant will remain as it did before, in each person.

The gift of the law will become fully “internalized” — and on that day that is “surely coming,” everyone will already know God, sin will be obsolete, and God will freely forgive and forget past sin once and for all.

Though Jeremiah prophesies a “new covenant,” there is no room here for supersessionist ideas - as if the Christian covenant replaces or surpasses the Jewish one. Jeremiah doesn't speak of a new law, but rather of a time to come in which God provides new, merciful ways of inner transformation that allow human beings to follow the existing law.

This is a Jewish idea picked up by Jesus and the early Jewish-Christian communities that followed him. We, like our Jewish brothers and sisters, seek that inner transformation that will someday render sin obsolete and teaching unnecessary — but to put it mildly, that hour has not yet come - though it is, Jeremiah insists, “surely coming”!

Our scripture reads:

²

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-psalm-5-11-12-6>

³ [The Hour Has Come: SALT's Commentary for Lent 5](#)

“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.”

I will write it on their hearts...speaks the poet Jeremiah.

And from the poetry of our psalm:

create in me a new heart, and renew a right spirit within me...

The heart, in ancient understanding, was understood to be the center of emotional and intellectual intelligence.

Create in me a new way of knowing - both intellectually and emotionally.

Create something new in me, so when I fall down, and fall down again, I will be able to get back up.

The confessional response we used again today were words from Abba Sisoës - a desert father from the 4th Century, reminding a fellow seeker to get up. Never fall down without getting back up.

What happens when you fall down? Over and over the ancient Israelites metaphorically fell down - and stood up again.

David, in our psalm, was definitely at a place of having fallen. Fallen hard.

Psalm 51 holds both a plea for forgiveness, and a recognition of the God who is eternally ‘for us’ - the one who offers steadfast love and abundant mercy.

I wonder what it was that allowed David, and the Israelites, to get up again and again. Was it knowing the law? Knowing it in their hearts?

When we’ve fallen, it’s often what we know deep within, that helps us stand again.

We speak of knowing something by heart.

What do you know by heart?

What have you been made to learn by heart, and chosen to?
poems? scripture? Maybe wedding vows? Songs? ([play clip](#))

Most of us know at least bits and pieces of these songs by heart.

They live within us. Maybe put a smile on our face or a spring in our step - maybe help us get back up when we're down.

Our scripture offers that as well -

The God *who is everlasting love* will never abandon us - no matter what our guilt says. Steadfast love and abundant mercy heal us from the lie of our worthlessness.

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;*

Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me...

What's written on your heart? What do you turn to in times of trouble?

Remember - again and again remember: **God is everlasting love.**

And Stand up... always stand back up.

INTRO TO JEREMIAH TEXT:

This week's reading comes from the part of the book of Jeremiah known as "The Little Book of Consolation" (Jeremiah 30–31).⁴

This text was written *following* the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and focuses on the covenant between God and the people.

The first covenant with the people goes back to Sinai. Before the Ten Commandments are given, the covenant is formed in Exodus 19 when God tells Moses to say the following to the people: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." To which the people responded, "Everything the LORD has spoken we will do." But we know that the words are barely out of their mouths when their promises are broken.

4

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-jeremiah-3131-34-21>

The people needed a way to remain God's people without the temple - that worship space and its sacred artifacts. The tablets are destroyed, but that does not mean their destruction alters the relationship between God and the people.

And so Jeremiah offers these words:

Baby dedication: a time of committing to one another and to God. We covenant - make a commitment to helping teach and raise Arlo as part of this community.

KIDS ARE HAVE AN IMPORTANT role - You're closest in age, and so have an important role in helping teach Arlo what it means to love each other and take care of each other.

So let's get to know Arlo - Emily/Mason - can you tell us about his name?

What makes Arlo happy?

How do you comfort him when he's sad? Are there things he especially likes?

What questions do the kids have?

Send kids back to their seats.

As a community, we commit to learning together and loving together.

We commit to each other to support one another in raising our children.

Take Arlo and walk through the congregation.

Arlo, you are known and loved by God and by this community.

May the love found here be an expression of God's love,
and something you come to know, deep in your bones.

And now,

May the Lord bless you and keep you,

May the very face of God shine upon you,

And may you walk in the ways of Peace. And all God's people said: AMEN.

Invite congregation to bless Arlo and his parents - VT 970 (slide)