
A New Covenant

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Fifth Sunday of Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Contrary to the old song, Jeremiah was not a bullfrog. The old band, "Three Dog Night," did not have it quite right. In fact, let me begin this morning by plugging the annual parish retreat at Kanuga this May. I will be conducting the program for that retreat this year, and the title will be what I just said: "Jeremiah Was Not a Bullfrog." the subtitle will be "Discover the Bible." In three hours on a Saturday morning, we will cover an overview of the entire Bible. We'll find out just who Jeremiah was, and we'll learn where in the world is Habbakuk. Join us!

But this morning, too, I want to talk about Jeremiah. He was not a bullfrog. One of the great prophets of the Old Testament, he appeared at a most critical time of Jerusalem's history, that is, when it was about to fall.

In the great Old Testament tradition, he prophesied not just the fall of the city Jerusalem, but also its restoration. "Do not say, "I am only a boy,"" the Lord said to him. "I have appointed you to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Jeremiah would prophecy destruction, but also restoration. He could see the reliance on false idols, the misplaced trust in military and political powers. Thus, he was often despised, and thrown into dungeons. But he also prophesied the restoration of the temple of Jerusalem. Jeremiah knew when to tear down, and when to build. That is the great evidence of someone who knows the Lord. There is a time to tear down, and a time to plant.

And to this Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, was given one of the most mysterious and yet most outstanding word in all of Scripture. It is the lesson we have heard this morning, Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 31. An Old Testament prophet delivers words that sound like the New Testament. In fact, the Book of Hebrews, in the New Testament, quotes this passage extensively.

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.

A new covenant. What in the world could it mean for us to live with God in a covenant like this? What is a covenant,

anyway?

Well, the custom of making covenants is an old one, and it has some curious features. I know that today most of us make covenants, or agreements, just by signing some contract. Here's to all you lawyers! We support an incredible tradition of contract law when we hire the lawyers and sign the papers.

But in the days of the ancient Near East, they marked a covenant this way. They killed an animal, and sliced it in half. Then, the two parties walked together between the two halves of the animal.

How dreadful!

It is generally thought that the killed animal represented the weaker party in the relationship. Since a covenant was often made between a superior party and an inferior party, some say that the sacrifice of an animal represented what would happen to the weaker party if the terms of the covenant were broken.

Fortunately, the customs surrounding the making of covenants evolved, like all traditions evolve. It may be that a meal, a common meal, became associated with that sacrificed animal. The consumption of that sacrificed animal became a ritual meal.

Today, there is no question that we need covenants. We need agreements and contracts. We need treaties and laws in order to live peaceably and in order. We need order to make possible the miracle of human health and welfare.

When we take a job, we sign a contract. When we buy a piece of property, we negotiate a contract. We buy a house and agree to certain covenants. When we sell, we sign a contract, too.

When we arrange relationships, we negotiate covenants, too. We join a fraternity or sorority. We join a church. We join a school community. We join a neighborhood association. We join a business trade group. We join a community service organization. Of course, when we marry someone, we agree to a covenant with that person.

These relationships all involve some sort of contract and agreement. So goes civilization itself.

We make covenants in order to enjoy a measure of health, wealth, or welfare. The old-fashioned term for this was "salvation," which means, basically, well-ness. To be saved means to be made well.

We still make covenants and agreements in order to find wellness, comfort. We make covenants in order to attain some sort of salvation. Obviously, I do not mean salvation in the eternal sense of the word. But I do mean it seriously.

When we sign a contract to take a new job, we are doing so in the hope, not only of earning money, but also the hope of doing something worthwhile, something we can be proud of, something that causes us satisfaction. This is an element of salvation.

When we make a covenant to live in a certain house, or a certain apartment or condominium, we are hoping that that living arrangement will be comfortable and life-giving.

When we sign a contract to send our children to a school, we are hoping, deep down, for future returns of friendship, happiness, and satisfying education for that child.

When we make a covenant with another person, when we marry another person, we are looking for health, welfare, and happiness. We are looking for a measure of salvation. Again, I do not mean what we usually mean by the word "salvation." I do not mean what happens to us after death on earth. I mean that we are looking for the "good life" here on earth.

Even churches and communities of faith also need contracts and covenants. These covenants and agreements are good things, good things for the earthly orders of civilization.

Yes, the custom of covenants is as old as civilization itself. Unfortunately, there is another practice just as old. It is the practice of breaking covenants. For as long as covenants have existed, covenants have also been broken.

I do not know exactly why sin exists. I do not know exactly how it is that everyone of us falls and fails. But I do know we miss the mark. We break our agreements, even those agreements we have worked for the hardest.

And when we break those covenants, we are helpless. We do not know how to make proper amends. Our covenants are noble, but they do not have the power to save. They do not have power to save because they do not know how to forgive. They do not redeem us from those inevitable occasions when we break them.

But there is another way.

There is a way -- a covenant, if you will-- that transcends every human institution and every historical system. It transcends the earliest forms of covenant.

It is the way that Jeremiah prophesied over 2500 years ago. Jeremiah said that there will be a new law, not written on stone. Not cut. Not relying on religious instruction. It will be written on the human heart.

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.

While this prophecy seems refreshing to us, it is also dramatically radical. Are we willing to forego our customary traditions in order to experience a new knowledge of God? Are we willing, for instance, even to forego our particular style of teaching one another about God?

The dramatically radical word of Jeremiah is that none of these old covenants saves us. Our covenants do not save us. Our agreements are necessary and valuable, but they do not save us. The right agreement will not save us. The right house, the right job, the right school, the right wife, none of that ultimately saves us.

The Lord God saves us.

Again, many of these old covenants are good things. Our systems of religion and society and culture depend upon them. But there is a new covenant. This covenant is not new because it was forged only a few days ago: Jeremiah proclaimed it years ago. The covenant is new because it makes all things new. This new covenant that is purely the forgiving grace of God. This is the God who has power to save.

This new covenant is in our heart. It is close to our very life. That is why our ancestors sensed that it involved blood. That is why Jesus shed blood. That is why Jesus picked up the chalice and said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

But it goes deeper even than that. Jeremiah says that we will all know the Lord. How will we know the Lord? We will know the Lord when we know forgiveness of sins. This new covenant is forgiveness, pure and simple. There is no power greater; thus, this forgiveness has the power to save.

Forgiveness is our word for today. Have you experienced forgiveness? Then you know the Lord. Have you forgiven somebody? Then you have known the Lord.

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