

Written on our Hearts

A sermon preached in Glebe Road United Church

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Jeremiah 31: 31-34

31 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. 32 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. 33 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. 34 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. (Jeremiah 31: 27-34)

What do you do when your world falls apart? That was the question that Jeremiah faced all through his ministry. He lived at a time when the leadership of Israel was incompetent and corrupt. Poor quality kings had weakened the fabric of the country so much that invasion by a foreign power was only a matter of time. First, the Assyrian Empire swept down from the north and split the country into two pieces, and then Babylonian army arrived from the east and attacked Judea.

The prophet Jeremiah lived in a very difficult time for Israel. Poor leadership had weakened the fabric of the country, and foreign invaders were stalking the land. Now King Nebuchadnezzar's army had subdued all of Judea except for the great fortress of Jerusalem, which had stood firm against all invaders for three hundred years. The last invading army to breach its walls was led by King David, who later made Jerusalem his capital. It was David's son, Solomon, who built the great Temple in the centre of the city on its tallest hill. Like all the armies before them, the Babylonians were also unable to take the city by force so they surrounded its borders and laid siege for two long years before its defenders were finally starved into surrender. Vengeance was swift. Its now defenceless citizens were cruelly put to the sword, and Solomon's Temple was burned to the ground. Then the leading people of the country were marched into exile to Babylon, where they would remain for the remainder of their lives.

Jeremiah witnessed these atrocities and much more. He had warned the king for over a year that this would happen. "This was God's punishment for breaking God's laws", he had said. "You made a covenant, a promise to God, and in return God gave you this bountiful land. Now that you have broken that covenant, God through the Babylonian armies has taken this land from you. And now God's promised land will lie empty for a generation. You will never return from your exile."

And it was so. The king and all his court were rounded up along with all the artisans, tradespeople and skilled workers. Then they were forced marched by their captors eastward to the land of the Babylonians. Their city was plundered; their great temple lay in smouldering ruins. All hope seemed to be lost. It seemed that God had abandoned them forever. And yet, Jeremiah's visions continued. It was when things seemed to be at their darkest that Jeremiah lifted their spirits with a new prophecy. "Listen up, you people", he said. "There will be hope for your children and grandchildren who will now be born in exile because God is not finished with God's people yet. A day will surely come when they will return to this land, and God will make a new covenant with this new generation. It will not be like the covenant of rules and laws that you have broken. The new covenant will be written, not on tablets of stone but on the hearts of God's

people. 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. 34 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.

One of the priests who went into exile after the fall of Jerusalem was the prophet Ezekiel. He must have remembered what Jeremiah said because years later in Babylon he would write about the new covenant as a new heart that God would give to God's people:

26 A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. 28 Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. 29 I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. 30 I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. (Ezekiel 36: 26-30)

It's the same message that Jeremiah had given. God is not finished with us yet. We are living in exile now, but we will return to the land God promised our ancestors. So keep the faith, remain vigilant, wait upon the Lord and the Kingdom of God will surely come.

Five hundred years later Jesus picked up the same theme in his ministry as he boldly proclaimed that with him this Kingdom of God had now finally come near. "We are entering a new age and a new covenant with our God. If you will follow me and be faithful you will come into this new kingdom that Jeremiah and Ezekiel were talking about." Jesus still calls us to follow him down a difficult path that involves "seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God" to quote yet another Old Testament prophet. Jesus told us to love our enemies, and pray for those who hurt us. How could we possibly do such a thing? He said that if we wanted to be a leader then we needed to be a servant to all: another impossible demand. He said that God's kingdom would come, not through force and coercion but through love: an incredibly naïve vision of the world so far as anyone could tell.

The church that bears the name of Jesus the Christ has been called to follow these difficult teachings ever since. We have often lost our way. More often than not we have discovered that we were heading in exactly the wrong direction. Yet the church continues. The church perseveres. And this church on Glebe Road is no different. We have now been on this path for 160 years. There have been many times when we could feel the nearness of this Kingdom of God, right here in this sanctuary. And there have been other times, many times, when the Kingdom of God seemed very far away. In fact, there were times when we could easily have felt just like the Israelites after Jerusalem fell, herded together and sent into exile. Many of us here this morning remain haunted by the dark days in 1992 when we surrendered trusteeship of this building, reduced our ministry to part-time, and waited for the inevitable final worship service before our doors were closed forever.

That final service still hasn't happened. It seems God isn't finished with us yet either. Eighteen years later we are still here, still worshipping, still waiting like those displaced refugees in far-away Babylon so long ago. What were they waiting for? Well, some had certainly lost all hope. They were just waiting for everything to be over; they were waiting to die. They were probably still overcome with anger and

bitterness about the injustice of it all. And so they just sat by the water's edge staring into its blackness. As the psalmist wrote of those times: "By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept ... How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137: 1-4a)

But there were also others who remained obstinately hopeful. Some of them were the children born in exile. They had never seen the promised land talked about so often by their parents and so had nothing to regret. They had heard Ezekiel preach about the new heart that God would give them. They had heard of Jeremiah's prophecy of the coming of the new day of the Lord. And they waited with eager anticipation for that day. They were the hopeful remnant, and it was in their hearts that God was building the future. It was in their spirits that God was lifting the people so they could look beyond their exile to the vision of a new day promised by God. And then, one day, it actually happened. Their exile was over, and they did go home, and they did see the promised-land that their parents had told them about.

And now what about us here in the church on Glebe Road? How does this story work for us in the twenty-first century. Are we like those worn out exiles waiting by the river to die? Do the events 18 years ago still haunt us? Do we still expect to close our doors. It's not hard to find things to worry about, that's for sure. Look at our finances. With deficits like ours we can now calculate that if nothing changes we will be gone in 3 years. So, we might think that there's no point in supporting this place. There's nothing to do except sit by the river and weep.

It's an easy trap to fall into. But there is an alternative. We can also be like the children of the exiles who have gotten over what happened in the distant past or better still, had never experienced it at all. They are determined that we will not close, despite all the challenges we face. And in this our 160th year, I'm feeling more and more that they are right! I look around now and feel a new excitement growing in church on Glebe Road. I too am waiting on tip-toe for the winds of God to blow through our lives once again and keep God's promises of a new heart and a new land.

The day of the Lord now seems closer to me than it ever has in my ministry here. There is a "buzz" about this place now, and it beckons us with an intensity Glebe Road has not felt for a long time. Every time we get more than 50 people coming to a worship service that feeling grows. I remember with thanksgiving all those who have gone before and have remained faithful believers – people like Ruth Pritchard who believed in the future of this place right up until her death a few weeks ago and now continues to bless our community with her gifts. God is remaking us into a new version of God's people. Thanks to Maria, we are now quite literally singing new songs of praise and thanksgiving that no one has ever heard before. Thanks to the newcomers among us, we are looking at new challenges and new opportunities to be God's people in our time and place. The way back home seems pretty clear right now, but it will take the efforts and courage of all of us to get there. It will be a wilderness journey much like other wilderness journeys that God's people have been called to travel. There will be lots of challenges along the way. No doubt about that. But, you know, I think we are going to make it because we will be going with the assurance that God walks with us every step of the way.

Thanks be to God.

Amen