

The Fifth Sunday of Lent
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
March 21, 2021
Deacon Dennis Taylor, RN

We acknowledge that we are on the traditional lands of the Coast Salish peoples who have reserve treaty rights to this land, including the Upper Skagit, Skagit and Swinomish Tribes who have stewarded this land throughout the generations. We thank these caretakers of this land, who have lived, and continue to live, here since time immemorial.

This is the last Sunday in Lent and next week we process into Jerusalem and into Holy Week. Lent B, in the lectionary, begins with God making and revising the covenants that were meant to build a relationship with the creation. Noah, Abraham and Moses each has a turn as God works out this relationship with those whom the Reverend Armand Larive called the created co-creators.

Today we come to Jeremiah, though whom God proclaims that “[t]he 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. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord”

Jeremiah’s ministry started in 626, about half-way through Josiah reign and lasted until the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple when Jeremiah is force to flee to Egypt in 587. Much of Jeremiah’s ministry was warning Judah about the chastisement that would come if Judah did not turn back to God and the catastrophes that did not occur, leading to frustration on Jeremiah’s part and loss of credibility with the people as the years past.

There had been some religious reform during Josiah's early reign when a Torah scroll was found during a Temple restoration. Nineveh and Assyria had fallen to the Babylonians in 612 and Judah kept choosing the wrong side and not listening to Jeremiah. Then Babylon defeats the kingdom and destroys the Temple and exiles the elite a final time in 587. Today's reading takes place during this time of the ending of Judah's existence as an independent kingdom.

The more people resisted Jeremiah's message, the darker things became. Then we have an announcement of a new covenant to come " '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.' " The Hebrews for 'put 'in can also mean 'give 'and the covenant will become something internal, rather than external that can be broken and forgotten. Paraphrasing Walter Brueggemann, God want a relationship with people and resolves to have it. No one in Judah was asking God into their heart. God writes the love onto their hearts, think tattooing with its discomfort and permanence. God's hold on humans cannot be erased without cutting out a part of themselves.

The covenant becomes nature but then there is a need to nurture the gifts. Even Jesus, the Word made flesh, had to nurture what was natural for him. Jesus had to learn what this creator business was all about and what part each played in the service of God and the creation. In experiencing the pain, suffering and grief Jesus attains what the author of Hebrews calls "having been made perfect," which is a single word in Hebrew, and does not mean that Jesus was "imperfect" but that he had attained full stature of sonship through experiencing pain and grief of Yahweh over the world's turning from the path. Through the experience of being fully human, Jesus becomes truly and fully what by his nature he already was.

Then some Greeks came up to Phillip and asked to see Jesus, who takes this request, as a sign that his time has come and his vocation will be fulfilled. Jesus is the embodiment of what it would mean to live into Jeremiah's new covenant. He is the icon for what it

will mean to live into this relationship with God. It is about obedience to and glorifying the creator but suffering, pain and grief are very much a part of Jesus' nurturing and while it brings empathy for the pain and grief of human experience and what God feels when the creation fails to live up to the expectations put on our hearts: love God, love neighbor and love self.

Jesus' Messiahship is not about swords or dominance, those things do not glorify the Creator or the creation, in fact they destroy. As Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of the Sokoto Diocese in Nigeria preached at a seminarian's funeral "Through violence you can kill the liar, but you cannot kill lies or install truth. Through violence, you can murder the terrorist, but you cannot end terrorism. Through violence, you can murder the violent, but you cannot end violence. Through violence, you can murder the hater, but you cannot end hatred. Unredeemed [hu]man[s] sees vengeance as power, strength and the best means to teach the offender a lesson. These are the way of the flesh." Skagit Valley Herald March 20, 2011 pg. A7

This is the vocation that we have been called into. It has been put within us and written on our hearts. The covenant is within us, we can only reject it or recognize the vocation and nurture what God has given us. God wants us to live into the light and not live with the dark. A spark is within each of us to discover. We need to nurture and mature into the light we are called to be

The last year has certainly opened opportunities to lament and stay with the first half of the lament, but also given us opportunities of nurturing the love that has been given to us and written on our hearts. This Lent allowed us to choose to do some self-care or take on a specific spiritual practice. If you did, great! And if you did not, that's great too! With a pandemic raging and all of the opening of the wounds of the oppressed, it is important to be kind to ourselves so that we can be present to all these events, changes and feelings.

The pandemic allows us to see what privilege looks like and who benefits from that privilege the most. It has shown that when both the written laws and the unwritten values of a society are driven only by the privileged those without are oppressed and marginalized. In serving God we are called to love and serve neighbor and in listening to those neighbors we are hearing that they are not well served.

What is God up to in this cacophony of so many different voices crying out for a place at the table? The sin of the privileged is to put “stumbling blocks” in the way of all who would fulfill what is put within them and written on their hearts. Romans 14 ¹²“So then, each of us will be accountable to God. ¹³Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.” As the book says and I believe that all are born with nurturable gift and talents to fulfill their purpose to the creator and the creation. ⁶“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! Matt 18. All should be allowed to nurture their nature and fulfill their purpose

I remember a time working in the emergency room, just a clerk and myself, and a particularly disagreeable individual came in and gave both of us a lot of grief as we worked to admit them. After about 20 minutes of nastiness I escorted the patient to the exam room and as they changed clothes and I walked out to the clerk’s desk out of my mouth came the words “Sometimes it is really hard to see the face of God in someone!” And the clerk agreed . Things went smoother from there.

There are Jews who believe that angels go before every human made in the image of God proclaiming that presence; Third Century Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: ‘A procession of angels passes before each person, and the heralds go before them, saying, “Make way for the image of God! ’”(Deut. Rab., 4:4). Consider what the world would be like if we took this picture to heart with every interaction. Just as Jesus is the icon for the covenant,

every human being is an icon of the Creator God. The reverence for God is shown in our reverence for each other. Our fear of offending or hurting another human being must be as ultimate as our fear of offending or hurting God believing that violence against another person is an act of desecration against God remembering that the denial of another's humanity is akin to the denial of God's divinity; and finally, our love of neighbor mirrors and reveals our love of God.¹

The full promise of this new covenant announced by Jeremiah is “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.”

1. Make Way for the Image of God! <https://interruptingthesilence.com> The Rev. Michael K Marsh