

More than a Twist Along the Way

The fifth sermon in a Lenten series entitled *Journeying to Jerusalem*

Jeremiah 31.31-34; John 12.20-33

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 29, 2009

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.

- Jeremiah 31.33

Which laws, then, are written on the heart? All the laws of Moses? Just the Decalogue? The answer is all of these things, and none of them. Just these words will suffice: "I am yours, and you are mine," says God. That is the language of love and faithfulness.

- Fred Craddock

The Readings

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.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. ²⁷' 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. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' ³⁰Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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Where Would That Leave You?

When I approach a biblical passage as the foundation for a sermon, I intentionally avoid the customary and comfortable; the elements we know so well we tend to overlook. Instead, I look for the unexpected, the quirks, the problems, the ambiguous elements that defy interpretation. This being said, you can imagine how excited I was this week; because today's readings are chock-full of new, ground-breaking ideas that press the envelope of our understanding, and move our discussion of the spiritual life into a new dimension altogether.

Consider the Jeremiah passage in which the prophet announces that God will enter into a new covenant with Israel. Nothing extraordinary in this; covenants in Jeremiah's day were as plentiful as they were common; agreements routinely enacted between peoples and governments outlining their responsibilities to each other. But a covenant that binds from the inside out – a law written on the heart – this is unique; a new concept of covenant. This ain't the time honored, tried and true talk about covenant, law, and covenant keeping.

New, confounding, and enigmatic elements abound in Jesus' teaching in John 12; beginning with the arrival of a group of Greeks - foreigners, pagans, strangers to Judaism and its ways – seeking Jesus, an obscure peasant rabbi from Galilee. This is surely a symbol of big things to come, when gentiles respond in faith to the good news of God in Christ. But that's in the future; in the interim, Jesus drops a spiritual bomb shell. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, he says, it will bear no fruit. The way to life, to translate the image, lies exclusively through spiritual transformation; death and resurrection. No filling out around the edges of faith, no sustained efforts at moral improvement; rather, complete transformation from the inside out. "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

John's Jesus goes on to pray a portion of the prayer from Gethsemane; goodness gracious, how close are we to Holy Week? If that's not enough, Jesus creates a sense of urgency and imminent climax when he proclaims, "Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out."

These are significant statements all; ground breaking, radically new statements that defy the wisdom of the day; the wisdom of any day for that matter, including our own. I tell

you; in light of passages like these I find it amazing that so many preachers continue to spout simple, practical, and pragmatic sermons; on the basis of passages like these, unbelievable! They lay it out all so clearly; the one, two three's, the A, B, C's of faith. It may be hard to live up to their principles of faith, their rules of the spiritual life, but it's all very clear.

I can't argue that this approach to faith isn't effective. I recently heard of a successful church that requires participation in a twenty week orientation of anyone seeking membership. Why? To insure that everyone believes exactly the same thing, to insure that everyone tows the line of "truth." Oh, what a joy it must be to gather on Sunday mornings; everyone thinking, acting, talking, perhaps even walking the same. What a joy! Friends, if this approach to faith is right, I'm absolutely wrong! I'm out in left field. I'm barking up the wrong tree altogether; because the faith instilled in me by Old and New Testament alike; the faith I have come to know through our tradition is a living, vital, and dynamic faith that doesn't require submission and blind obedience; but rather spiritual curiosity, passion, and the courage to be led by God toward the new thing God is always about to do.

I could preach the one, two, three's and the A, B, C's of faith, but where would that leave you? What role would your freedom play; the freedom that God seems to treasure so? What role would your intelligence play, your autonomy, or your personal responsibility? The A, B, C's and one, two, three's of faith may be hard to live up to, but they require only submission and obedience. The passages before us today ain't like that at all. They press the envelope of our understanding and experience; and it's appropriate that we are pressed now, because if we are to make it to Jerusalem - if we are to complete our Lenten journey - something radically new will be required of us, something found in passages like these. Let's pray together, shall we?

Gracious One, bless us in this gathering; grant us the real sense that we are woven together as one in your presence. Help us to realize the significance of this unity, so that we never again attempt to walk the way of faith alone. Let this be our assurance, let this be our experience on this day. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

A Radically New Departure

Our Lenten sermons have been pretty lenient on us so far. It seems that someone else always bears the burden. God is, as I said in our first sermon, always with us. We already have

everything we need because God is present to us providing grace. Even when we make wrong-headed mistakes and take wrong turns, God uses our faux pas to mold us into something more. Of course, we need a respite along the way - we need Sabbath – but God grants that as well to all receptive spirits. Finally, Peggy made it very clear last week that God’s love is adequate for any and every need that we have.

So far the spiritual burden has been on someone else, aka, God. It falls on God to draw us in, provide grace and forgiveness, and mold us into the divine image. But the free ride ends today, because today’s passages point to the one thing God asks of us; everything we are and have. These passages deal with the deepest recesses of our hearts; they reach into the very core of our beings, and speak to us of a new departure altogether. They speak of death and resurrection, radical transformation, becoming new from the inside out. They do not suggest that we fill out around the edges of faith, becoming more obedient and conforming to the moral life. Rather, they speak of a complete and radical transformation of who we are ...from the inside out. These passages are like flashing lights at a railroad crossing, or road blocks set up by the police. There is no crossing here. They are like road lines trailing off the edge of a map into mystery, signaling the uselessness of our maps. If we are to complete our Lenten journey; if we are to make it to Jerusalem; we will have to seek a radically new departure; because we can’t get there from here.

To continue this journey, to follow from here requires a commitment previously unknown to us. Jeremiah calls it the law written on the heart. To the ancient Hebrews this was a shocking statement. To their belief, the heart was the strength that guided the moral and personal life; and anything that came out of the heart was spontaneous. It didn’t require effort, but was simply a light that guided all actions. Imagine a people spontaneously embracing the wisdom of God; easily recognizing their own worth in God’s eyes, and recognizing equally the worth of others. Think of a world populated by spontaneous, passionate, and joyful children of God. What a wonderful, wonderful image.

As wonderful as this image appears, Jesus makes it clear that this is not an easy transition, because a grain of wheat has to fall into the ground and die to bear fruit. The way to life, Jesus insists, is to pass through suffering and death to a new life altogether. Such radical

statements were nothing new for Jesus. He spoke of this radical transformation, for example, with Nicodemus. You have to be born from above is the expression Jesus used. This phrase, we should note, is intentionally ambiguous. The Greek word that is translated born from above in the NRSV means both born *again*, which is what Nicodemus heard, and it also means to be born *spiritually*, to be born from above, which is what Jesus intended. It's not a transition, Jesus says, it's a radical transformation – like being born all over again - and you can't get your mind completely around it.

Jesus spoke in similar terms to the Samaritan woman at the well. He said that he would give her *living* water – again an intentionally ambiguous term– it means running water as in a flowing stream, but also living water like spring rains that nourish, and bring forth leaf and bloom. Such statements were nothing new for Jesus, so it should come as no surprise that he insists on a radical transformation in today's reading. The way to life is through suffering and death; the way to life is through a radical transformation that God alone can bring about.

I dare say most of us don't like to think about this type of transformation for ourselves, or Jesus either for that matter. We want to spare Jesus. We don't particularly like Holy Friday with all its suffering, death, and darkness. It's a lot more fun to skip from the festivities and triumph of Palm Sunday to the festivities and triumph of Easter Sunday. It's a lot more fun to bypass the cross altogether; but it has been rightly said that “each of us must stand beneath the tree and watch the dying if we are to be there when the stone is rolled away.” (Ann Weems, *Holy Week*.)

We certainly want to spare ourselves such anguish. The very thought of passing through suffering to get to life; the very thought of giving ourselves over to God for radical transformation; such thoughts are frightening, painful, intimidating, depressing. But If we are to walk the way of faith indicated by Jesus, we have to open ourselves to the new and radically different; transformation in spirit and truth.

I once suffered through a very discouraging conversation with an elder in a church I served during my college years. The gentleman had lost half of his stomach because of smoking, and in consequence had significant difficulties with eating and digestion. Nevertheless, he continued to smoke. He reasoned that smoking wouldn't keep him out of

heaven. He may have been right, smoking may not have kept him out of heaven; but the self indulgent way he approached faith consigned him to hell right in the here and now!

Transformation requires more. Not more of the same, not just enough to make it by the skin of our teeth ...but more. We have to be willing to give up that which is comfortable; that which we have depended on forever; because God asks more of us. God asks everything of us; demanding that we walk willingly into uncharted territory.

One of the clearest signs of a stagnant spiritual life is a comfortable, knowing spirit. How can we think we know where we are when we don't have an adequate road map? How can we be comfortable when God requires of us a radical transformation? How can we feel confident when God asks us to venture into uncharted territory?

I mentioned earlier that the A, B, C's and the one, two, three's of faith may be hard to live up to; but they are clear, requiring only obedience and submission. If Jeremiah and Jesus are to be trusted - and you are the only one who can decide if they are - if Jeremiah and Jesus are to be trusted, then faith is not something you live up to; faith is something you live into. We live into faith by giving ourselves over to radical transformation from the inside out.

Does this scare you? It scares me, I tell you; the things God wants to do with and for me scare me almost to death. I often use playful clichés to help us grasp important aspects of faith. Clichés like, "God loves you and there's not a cotton-pickin' thing you can do about it"; "If we're not having fun, we're doing something wrong"; or, "Bidden or not bidden, God is present." While I stand by each of these, I wouldn't have you conclude from them that faith is simple and undemanding. There is nothing more demanding than giving ourselves to God.

Faith is a hard trip to make, but it's the only trip worth taking. It's demanding, to be sure, but it's the only journey worth our while. And the good news is this; we never walk that journey alone. We are part of a faith community in which we find mutual support, love and care, and countless opportunities to gather for strength and comfort. You can see from this how very important it is for the body of Christ to come together, because it's only then that we have the support and the companionship of others in faith. It's the only trip worth taking, the only journey worth embarking on, but we never make it alone.

Making our way from here to Jerusalem – to the Easter celebration – requires more than navigating twists and turns along the way; making our way to Jerusalem requires a radically new departure; it requires giving ourselves over to God for a transformation from the inside out. But make no mistake; God is with us every step of the way, and God doesn't ask us to go anywhere God has not already gone. As we approach Jerusalem and Holy Week, therefore, it is appropriate to remind ourselves of the first affirmation of Lent; God is with us, thus we already have everything we need for the journey. Amen.