

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34

31-32 "That's right. The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won't be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant even though I did my part as their Master." God's Decree.

33-34 "This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them—write it on their hearts!—and be their God. And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They'll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I'll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I'll forget they ever sinned!" God's Decree.

There was once a flock of pelicans that happily fished off the coast of California. One day, a fishing company began cleaning their catch at a nearby dock, where it was convenient for them to cast the discarded fish scraps into the water. The pelicans, drawn to the daily ritual, soon gave up fishing for themselves and settled into a more domesticated existence. Life was pretty good for these pelicans, at least until the fishermen discovered that there was a market for fish scraps. Abruptly, the free meals ceased.

Despite this regrettable CHANGE of fortune, the pelicans continued to show up every day at meal-time, only to go away with empty stomachs. It wasn't long before the lack of sustenance began to take its toll. The unsightly appearance of the emaciated birds eventually drew the public's attention, and experts were called in to investigate the cause of their plight. For some unknown reason, the pelicans no longer seemed able to access the abundance of food that teemed just below them in the sea. After a thorough investigation, it was concluded that the pelicans were starving to death because they'd forgotten how to fish!

What was instinctive for the pelicans at one time—fishing for their own food—was forgotten and lost when they got lazy and took advantage of dining on the scraps the fishermen threw into the sea. They needed to make a change if they were going to survive. They were going to need to return to their roots—their instincts in hunting.

When God created humanity, he created us with relationship in mind—relationship with him first and foremost—and then relationship with each other. But it didn't take long until other temptations caught the attention of God's blessed beautiful creation of humanity, and the relationship they were meant to have with God lost its' meaning, not on God's part, but on our part. Like the pelicans in the story I just told, change was, and is needed if one is to recover and survive **in God's kingdom**.

During this season of Lent thus far, we have reflected on the topics of covenant, sin, confession, forgiveness and God's deep love for each and every one of us. If we take all of these teachings seriously, it seems that the next natural response is to make changes in our lives. That's what it means to repent, to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to making changes in one's life.

In today's scripture we read God's words to Jeremiah, the so-called weeping-prophet, about the need for change among the Israelites. He and his countrymen were under the thumb of foreign and godless powers. The temptation was intense, and the people of Israel gave in to it and abandoned their covenant with God, yet again. Religious faith had vanished like a vapor in the wind.

God tried to make it as easy as possible for them to keep their promise to be faithful to God. You may remember that God wrote the guidelines on two stone tablets that Moses brought down the mountain and gave to the people whom he led out of Egypt.

Do you remember what Moses found the people doing when he came down the mountain with The Ten Commandments? They were worshipping a golden calf that they had built while Moses was gone. God was angry. Moses was very angry too—so angry that he threw to the ground the two stones with the commandments written on them, and they broke into many pieces.

But because of Moses' pleading with God on the people's behalf, God gave them yet another chance. Once again God wrote the commandments on two stones that Moses brought to God, and Moses gave them to the people. There it was, all etched in stone, the commandments designed to help the people keep their covenant with God. It seems that it couldn't have been made any easier for them. Yet, the people continued to break their promise of faithfulness to God again and again.

So, God took the initiative to try something new. No longer would the covenant between God and God's people be one of mere Law, rules and regulations grounded in fear and intimidation. The relationship would no longer be carved in stone, written on parchment, or hidden in the Holy of Holies. The new covenant would be natural, dynamic, and living.

The program of change, which God announced through the prophet would be written on the "hearts" of the people—it would be in their emotions, their hopes and dreams. God was updating the covenant, reframing the relationship, moving from commandments to conversation, from rules to relationship. No longer would they simply know about God as an external agent who calls for their obedience, but they would know God with their emotions, their hearts and their very lives. God was offering a new opportunity for the people to change from a **pattern of failure to a relationship of forgiveness.**

Jesus would later embody this new covenant, this reframing of the story. While the Pharisees and others around him would continually press for the rules, Jesus was constantly calling people to engage God through a relationship rather than through religious ritual. He said, essentially, to know me is to know God — to follow me is to follow a new path, and to be in God's presence, to experience God's grace is the way to real change. He painted a picture of a future filled with joy for those who would be transformed in this way.

The question for us then is – are we any different than the people Moses led from Egypt or the people Jeremiah was speaking to for God? The obvious difference being that they didn't have Jesus—we do. Even with the grace and reconciliation of the Christ, human beings are still human beings: testing limits, crossing boundaries, taking for granted, and, ultimately, failing to keep the covenant with God.

How often do we forget the basics? You know what I mean—loving God and neighbor. How regularly are we less than loving, less than kind, less than respectful, and less than generous? How often do we ignore compassion, mercy, sacrifice, and justice in favor of our personal comfort, security, enjoyment and entitlement?

Unfortunately, for many Christians the written gospel resides most commonly in books, not in the muscle of the human heart. The "good news" is too often external. God's challenge to us is not that we believe in a book or that we follow a set of teachings. God's challenge is that we become the very body of Christ, the living embodiment of God's grace and love.

In one of his books called "Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary," Lee Strobel tells of one kind of Mary who isn't so much "unchurched" as she is "unrelated."

Mary lived in Michigan and grew up attending church and Sunday school. In her teen years, she became friends with the other youth. She continued attending church on and off through her adult years. By the time Mary was 31, she had two small children. A friend from another church invited her to attend a crusade. Mary isn't sure why she agreed, but she did. Mary heard the gospel message and learned what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It struck her as though she were hearing it for the very first time. Many have had such an experience.

The next day, Mary attended another service with her friend. It was a beautiful experience to see her faith come alive. Following the second service, Mary had some questions for the guest preacher. She shared with him, "I've just realized I've been playing religion all my life," she said. She told how she was active at her church and how she even served on committees. "I've heard about the Crucifixion so much since I was a child that I've been numb to it," she explained. But then it struck her, "I realized today," she admitted, "that I don't have a relationship with Christ. I don't want to play church anymore! I don't want to play any more games."

It's time to embrace a new story, another covenant — the one God has been calling us toward all along. God wants us to know him, not just argue about what we know about him. God calls us away from playing church. God's word through Jeremiah is a call for us to move from our heads to our hearts, from reasoning to communication, from religion to a relationship with God.

Wonder how that would change things in our spirits, our churches and our world? What is written in your heart? Amen.