

Rev. Adrienne Meier

March 24, 2021, Midweek Service for the Fifth Week in Lent

St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Broken Covenants

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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.

Many years ago, back when I was a church camper, we used to sing an anti-war song called “One Tin Solider.” I looked it up, and, apparently, it was recorded by a band named Coven for a western movie called *Billy Jack*, all of this was some time before I was a church camper, so (shrug). The song is a ballad, telling the story of two people - the Valley People and the Mountain People. The Mountain People are said to possess a treasure which they are willing share, but the Valley People, who want the treasure all to themselves, invade and slaughter the Mountain People. When the time comes to reveal the treasure, all it is are the words, “Peace on Earth.” A powerful inscription that could change lives and chart a new path. That is what Jeremiah’s renewed covenant promises to be—something that, when allowed to dwell deeply in us can change our lives and the lives of those around us.

Our lives are full of broken covenants. Here are a few: police officers have sworn to protect their communities, but too often make victims of those they were sworn to protect. This is a broken covenant. Many business try to make their workplaces friendly to diverse employees and customers, but employees feel left behind and unheard when discrimination happens. This is a broken covenant. We pledge support to the people who educate and heal, but offer no real protections when their lives are placed in danger. This is a broken covenant. We are unfaithful spouses, aloof parents, neglectful of our own aging parents. These are broken covenants. We shun our neighbors, harbor hate in our hearts, and tell off-color jokes. These are broken covenants. Our lives are full of broken covenants. We claim to follow God, but our actions too often paint a different story.

The truth is that these broken covenants occur because we seek after other gods. We seek safety, power, control, success, popularity, the best of everything - and we want it all cheap! We are not seeking God, we are seeking something else and we treat our neighbors accordingly. Walter Brueggemann, Professor Emeritus at Columbia Theological

Seminary, writes that we live in a world where “scores are kept, books are balanced, and nothing is ever forgotten. It is a world of despair, because we are locked in forever to old behavior.” But, Brueggemann says, “New possibility, however, can happen in that world only when there is forgiveness, when in an act of inexplicable generosity the vicious cycles of resentment and revenge are broken.”

Jeremiah’s renewed covenant is built on the forgiveness of God. When we break a covenant with our neighbors, when we seek after anything that is not God, we break our covenant with God. The only hope for change, the only possibility of a renewed covenant, is through God’s forgiveness. The matter of the cross is of God laying down safety, power, control, success, popularity, the best of everything - God laying it aside in order to write with us a new covenant. In order to change the way we do things. This is our model for every broken covenant. What are we serving when we break it, and can we lay it aside? Can we tolerate risk, give up control, be willing to fail, take the unpopular option, give up what we perceive to be the best in order to renew our covenant with our neighbor?

What then, is the inscription this new covenant places on our hearts? Forgiveness. Generosity. Abundance. Love. In our hymnal, there is a one-stanza hymn titled, “On My Heart Imprint Your Image.” The lyrics are by Danish 17th century bishop and hymn writer Thomas Hansen Kingo and are set to a haunting tune by the German composer Johann König. Kingo’s original hymn had twenty-nine stanzas, but just this one has been translated and set in English. It reads,

*“On my heart imprint your image, blessed Jesus, king of grace
that life’s troubles not its pleasures ever may your work erase.
Let the clear inscription be: Jesus, crucified for me,
is my life, my hope’s foundation, all my glory and salvation!”*

Amen.