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**St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

*Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36; Reformation; Confirmation*

## **A Truth You Can Trust**

### **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 married to them, 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.

### **John 8:31-36**

Jesus said to the Judeans who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

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You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.

When I hear these words of Jesus, my mind skips ahead to the end of the story to demand along with Pilate, “What is truth?”

Truth no longer feels absolute. In fact, today, truth is up for debate. With the accusation of “fake news” being thrown around, it feels impossible to trust any reports about what is currently happening in our world if you cannot see it with your own eyes. Scientific research can be defunded, government agencies that report statistics on the economy, public health and education can be shuttered because we no longer trust what experts tell us, what peer-reviewed journals publish as truth.

Yet the truth will make you free.

In a post-truth world, Jesus' statement feels like a taunt. It seems that truth is simply what is said the loudest and repeated the most forcefully. It's no wonder we are confused about the truth Jesus tells us.

This truth has something to do with what Jeremiah describes as the Old Covenant and the New, yet we endlessly confuse them. We have exchanged God's grace for God's law, promises for striving. We replace God's gracious work in Jesus with our own attempts to earn salvation through our good deeds. We hear words of God's love as something we must enact. We read God's promises of justice as a checklist for us to do. We exhaust ourselves and we confuse this with salvation and redemption.

The Old Covenant, given to God's people on stone tablets on Mt Sinai, could bring order and safety among people committed to live them, but never peace nor salvation. It shows the ways humanity falls short because we cannot, through our own will, live in a way that perfectly loves God, perfectly honors our neighbor, perfectly cares for creation.

While we cannot uphold the Old Covenant, God continues to call us and claim us and uses it to move us to the New. If we could live by the Old Covenant, why would the New be needed? It functions as a mirror, showing us our need of grace.

Outwardly, living by either covenant may look the same - loving our neighbor, working for justice and peace, caring for creation, yet any good we do through the Old Covenant is a hard-won battle of our wills. Living under the New Covenant is intrinsically different.

Each one of Luther's explanations of the Ten Commandments begins with the phrase, "We are to fear and love God so that..." According to *By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, this phrase shows how God moves us toward God's will. "In between the words *fear* and *love*...lies a life-changing - nay, life-giving - space where the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith...[this] is where God's gospel promise in the Word, that is, in Jesus, takes up its claim on you." (See Note 1) That space for the Holy Spirit to create faith comes when we understand that we cannot do this on our own and is a free gift of grace.

In the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, Reformer Philip Melancthon wrote, "Because faith truly brings the Holy Spirit and produces a new life in our hearts, it must also produce spiritual impulses in our hearts. The prophet shows what those impulses are when he says "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (Jer 31:33). After we have been reborn and justified by faith, we begin to fear and love God, to

pray for and expect help from [God], to thank and praise [God]... We also begin to love our neighbor because our hearts have spiritual and holy impulses." (See Note 2)

When the New Covenant is written in our hearts, when we receive the forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God by grace through faith, the good we do for our neighbor naturally flows as the fruit of the Spirit, a gift from God. We are free to serve our neighbor because we are freed from concerns about our own - and their own - holiness and goodness. We are not driven to serve our neighbor in order to earn favor or appear morally upright, but simply because that is what our neighbor needs.

This is what our world needs - not more striving and self-righteousness, but God's grace and mercy.

God is always making us new, calling us to reflect God's goodness and mercy in new ways. Christ has redeemed us and the Holy Spirit fills us. In the midst of a world that feels broken, where truth is up for grabs, God's gift of newness and wholeness comes to us.

God's spirit is always ready to re-form us, writing the truth of God's grace and love for us in the depths of our hearts.

You will know the truth and the truth will make you free. Amen.

Notes

Note 1: *By Heart*, 45

Note 2: "Apology to the Augsburg Confession", *Book of Concord* - ed. Wengert, 140