

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.

John 8:31-36

Then Jesus said to the Jews 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.

I was in Italy these last two weeks, which you might know. Jess and I were visiting our younger son Jack, who’s taking a semester abroad, studying fashion in Milan. Us being good parents dictated that we had to go visit him. A hardship, I know.

No, it was, as you might imagine, a total delight and more than a little mindblowing. We were once sitting in a cafe having lunch while piped in through some invisible speakers was background music. John Denver’s “Country Roads.” We together remembered the lyrics, which are about West Virginia: “Life is old there, older than the trees,” they claim. Sitting in the medieval city of Bellagio, we three declared that life is older still in Italy.

One place we visited was a wigmaker’s workshop. In Florence, this is a wigmaker whose family has been making wigs—for royalty, for opera, for governors of various sorts and, when we were there, for Halloween—and making them in the same shop over which were a couple of rooms where they lived, since 1720. “Can you imagine being born into a life,” I wondered, probably aloud, but who can say as I was in a state of overwhelmed

exhaustion for the whole first week. “Can you imagine being born into a life and gratefully living into it, never once saying (as any red-blooded American would just before heading west), ‘I don’t even like wigs, Dad! And I hate this house!’”

The back wall of the house was the first wall of the city, built in the 13th century, now mostly gone but still standing as part of this house, hemming its people in behind and before, safely keeping this wig-making family charged also with purpose, holding them behind and before. Is this warm freedom or is this a hot and binding prison cell?

Jeremiah was having to reframe a lot of settled thought, a new voice in an old tradition.

Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet because he was broken-hearted about what had befallen the people, about what the people had drawn upon themselves. Prophesying at the same moment of crisis for the people that many of the prophets were, Jeremiah stands out for his being less angry about the terrible position the people were in, the terrible position they had put themselves in, less angry and more broken-hearted about it all.

Babylon was coming. Things were about to change. Everything was about to change. Israel had already fallen, next would be Judah, these once united kingdoms that had long been operating as two.

Israel had already fallen. Next would be Judah—
but not without a fight.

Judah wasn’t going to go without a fight. Under the guidance of their king, Zedekiah, they staged a rebellion against Babylon, which the nationalists among the people were sure they would win but about which Jeremiah thought altogether otherwise.

“Do not do this,” much of his prophesying might be boiled down to. “Don’t do this. We won’t win. There’s simply no way we could possibly win. Babylon will come, and it will be devastating, but it will be even more devastating if we try to pick a fight first, if we think we have any chance of warding them off.”

On the flight home, I watched a Danish film called “April 9th.” It’s about the German raid of Denmark in 1940. A breach of the non-aggression pact Denmark had struck with Hitler’s Germany, this is known as the shortest battle in the Second World War. It lasted six hours. But I knew nothing of it. Every movie I’d ever seen about the Second World War was

always with the ultimate reassurance that “we” won, and not only that “we” won but that “we” were proven history’s heroes, its ultimate and indisputable good guys.

This film comes from a very different place. A small squadron of soldiers, maybe ten in number, are seen in training. Reliant on bicycles, among their drills are the speedy repairing of flat bicycle tires.

First they are to do it in two minutes.

Then they are to do it in a minute and half.

None succeed.

Amidst their rickety and beautifully naive training, they receive word that the Nazis are indeed coming, just as they heard might be the case, and it would come to them to be the first line of defense, to hold them off until reinforcement can arrive.

I sat stiff in my airplane seat as all this unfolded, fighting off tears. All around me, everyone else was watching “The Devil Wears Prada 2,” with its lovely drama unfolding in Milan and Como, places I’d just experienced myself. But we were in the airspace over Denmark and I figured I still had a thing or two to learn.

The soldiers on their rattling bicycles rode as fast as they could (which wasn’t that fast) to the knoll where they would hide while the Germans rolled in. Given light arms and forty bullets each, they laid poised while armored tanks, the likes of which these soldiers had probably only heard, had never seen, remained yet coming, not yet arrived.

Until the grinding and cranking of their terrible might foretold their terrible mounting of the modest, unkeeping knoll.

The Danes lose ground.

They mount their bikes.

Tanks now arrived: The Danes scatter and over precious, precarious hours lose two soldiers, each one a heartbreak,

the second one lost when they’d kept fighting past Denmark’s surrender.

Surrender:

I think it was the German airplanes, now sliding nearly soundlessly high overhead, that had Denmark deciding to surrender, which this bicycle battalion didn’t yet know.

It shocked me. I’m sure the movie was made to tell a story whose ending the moviemakers assumed everyone in the audience would know. But I didn’t know it. I know

the Second World War from the distant shore of the United States, our long deliberation about whether to go fight—a choice we had, not one imposed on us—and then our ultimate victory: “Suck it, Nazis!” This was a very different movie-going experience. The film wanted us to see why the decision to surrender was made and furthermore why, though humiliating, indeed emasculating for those soldiers on their bicycles, it was the right decision, the wise decision.

Jeremiah. Jeremiah knew he was a member of a family-nation, long standing in their place, their beloved land, a family-nation whose soldiers had bicycles while the coming invaders had tanks and airplanes.

And now, in 586 before the Common Era, it had happened.

The Temple was destroyed, the land was sacked, and the people were taken, separated from their land and their ways and indeed from one another, taken into exile in dirty, decadent Babylon—

the ones worthy of taking, that is, the young and the strong and the beautiful, while others were left amidst the rubble, the very ones this nation of people answerable to the Lord God were to take care of—children and the elderly and the sickly and the ugly. They’d made their city and land beautiful and desirable. Ignoring the social needs of the poor and the sick, the widow and the orphan, they’d created a proud nation desirable for the taking. And now Babylon had taken it. And all was lost.

All was lost.

But not forever.

“The days are surely coming...” Jeremiah prophesied through tears. “The days are surely coming,” he said, possibly from the bottom of a pit, the place into which he’d been thrown as a prisoner for refusing to tell the king what he wanted to hear—that Judah would be victorious, that Judah would stand shining and proud, when they would not. They would not. All would be lost. And yet “...surely...” the Lord would make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, and it would be a law inlaid within them, written on their hearts.

It’s important to notice what verses come before these. Scholar J. Blake Couey tells us this. Just prior to this quiet promise of a new covenant, it is declared, “In those days they shall no longer say: ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on

edge.' But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge." This means, according to Couey, that individuals shall be accountable for their own decisions, which introduces personal responsibility into the shared life of faith.

He writes, "The requirements of the old covenant stood outside of the individual, as external teachings that had to be passed on communally. But if a new generation was not properly initiated into the covenant, ...then the covenant could be broken. By contrast, the requirements of the new covenant reside 'within' each individual, no matter what their social standing. As a result, they no longer have to be taught. This internalization shifts authority from a communally shared body of tradition to the transformed individual conscience."

This move from communal faith, intergenerational in hope and responsibility, to something more individual only continues in the verses that follow, the verses we heard earlier read for worship, the verses we hear every year when we celebrate Reformation Sunday, which this Sunday is. The Reformation is the social transformation within the Western Church that, in 1517, has Martin Luther nailing his Ninety-five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. By these he called into question the ultimate earthly authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

This in time gave us Lutherans. In a simultaneous set of events, it gave us Anglicanism, and eventually Presbyterianism, Methodism, and our own beloved, disputatious, locally autonomous Congregationalism. Enabling this scattering of authority was the technological breakthrough of a printing press with moveable type, making books easier to make and to distribute, making literacy a new possibility and eventually theological imperative, and making everyone indeed an authority in their own right.

Further justifying this democratic move, made herky-jerky over two millenia, was the promise Jeremiah issued on behalf of the Lord. Following the liberation of the individual from intergenerational sin, this comes as further unbinding because the days were surely coming when the law of God would be written on people's hearts, each person's heart, this one's here, that one's there, the Lord having written it in an act of astonishing individualism.

Which I imagine gives justification for all sorts of error—theological error, cultural error, whether consciously so or not:

Think of how we live as Americans, radically individualistic in our thinking and assuming, so sure we have personal rights with hardly a thought that we also have interpersonal responsibilities, so arrogant in our assertion that freedom of speech means being free to say whatever you want whenever you want and to feel violated if your saying so is met with consequence.

Think of how much of the American church functions, what faith it declares and makes manifest, so sure that Christianity is a matter of having the right ideas about God and the Bible, the right words to say about Jesus and who he's to be in our lives, the right understanding of what truth is, both narrow and brittle while also ahistoric and largely self-made. There's an unmooring here happening, and, though we swear by it as freedom, it is rather ensnaring, leaving us isolated, alone, and unable to think clearly for thinking clearly can only happen in relationship, with others and with reality itself.

The hymn that will close our service seems an especially overt example of this, "Lord, I want to be Christian in my heart." I love this hymn; I love singing it. And I can get with the spirit of it, even if the literal words strike me as misbegotten, lulling us into a misbegotten comfort with being Christian but in our hearts. We're to be more loving in our hearts, we're to be more like Jesus in our hearts, as if there needs to be no action that demonstrates our Christian convictions, as if there will be no material transformation with our transformed hearts, the law now written there rather than in a book we might together study, in a shared set of practices we might together enact. "Our hearts are in the right place," goes one very American assurance. "It's the thought that counts," we claim, often as an excuse.

For what it's worth, our other hymn to come calls us very much back from such isolated interiority, "I Sing the Song of the Saints of God." I chose this one as a change from what I first decided. I did this because we sang this at Susan Booth's memorial service, which was in Stockbridge a few weeks ago, and I was surprised by how deeply moved I was by it. Really, I could barely make it through the song, which I think I hadn't sung since I was a child in church. It caught me by surprise to have my singing choked with emotion.

To be clear, it is not a profound song. It isn't theologically rich, or musically inspired, or lyrically sweeping. It's just sweet, which is not to say syrupy, though you could say that. And indeed David has said that, when I asked about making the change and he said,

“Um...no...? Or can we sing my version of it instead?” which is more theologically rich and biblically rooted.

Less of the English school boy, which the old lyrics seem clearly to be, and more of the Sunday school class, it likely will yet move me to tears. There’s something to be said for basic Christian kindness, kindness being not exclusive to Christianity but certainly essential to it. There’s something to be said, especially these days, for basic Christ-like living as best we can manage amidst an otherwise cruel and cutting context. When Vivek Ramaswaney is proudly tormenting his political opponent in Ohio with reminders of her being raped as a child and there’s nothing we can do to shame him and his enablers, there is some comfort in simply giving a hand to a friend in need and being kind in word and deed as God wants us to do—and sweetly singing our conviction so to do.

Because, turns out, we’re not quite there yet. Turns out we haven’t yet arrived to a place of faith where the law of God is so utterly written on our hearts that we don’t yet have to teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord.” No, turns out, we’ve not quite arrived in that place of faith where all know God, from the least of them to the greatest, where there’s something natural or unswerving for us in doing God’s will, in living in accordance with God’s universal love, God’s sweeping salvation such that none are lost. So, we do indeed need to sing this conviction. We do indeed need to gather and to study and to practice and to declare that what has been promised and commanded we might then live into and live out. Turns out, we’re not beyond the need to be taught and to learn, to school ourselves and one another, to gather as church so to be reformed and transformed and indeed made more cruciform that the world might be saved even with the help of our modest efforts, the world might be saved by God’s manifest grace and love.

Which is one more error made possible in hearing this passage read every year on Reformation Sunday—that we of the reformed branch of the church have so arrived. Now shed of all Catholic chancel-prancing, all confession to the priest and obeisance to papist decree, now firm in the stripped down practice of “sola scriptura, sola fide” (only Scripture, only faith), we have skipped over the rest of history and landed ourselves on that distant far shore where we’re beyond error, we’re beyond the need to be taught and to learn and indeed to be corrected. The law of God is native to us, written on our hearts.

It's a truer reading to continue to hear this as promise. It's a truer reading to be convicted in it as aspiration, a vision we're to pursue rather than a fulfillment we're to assume as ours for having taken the right path. We must trust in it as future-oriented and as challenge, rather than as a present-day arrival that us winners might rest on our earned laurels. Though we might have escaped the binding of our forebears, we are not free as we might like to imagine ourselves to be.

Except in the moment. Except in the moment of arrival, of the advent of truth; the moment of God's immediate presence and our immediate receiving. There is the moment of eternal in-breaking, when we are as we shall be, when all is as has been promised.

Perhaps that moment is now.

Thanks be to God.