

5th Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.21.21

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 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“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. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. (433)

Last week in worship, I told a problematic story—the story of Adam and Eve, the garden and the serpent. This week, we saw how such a problematic story can play out horribly, in Atlanta, at three Asian massage parlors.

The man who committed the mass murder was under the impression that sexual desire is something to be avoided, something deeply threatening, existentially threatening. This, it seems, he learned at church, or at least had confirmed to him at church—that sexual desire and experience have the power even to push you beyond the reach of God’s grace. This is not true, but it is what he believed, and had been led to believe—and I’d be willing to bet that a bedrock story for this wrong-headed doctrine is the one we heard last week.

He was also under the impression that Asian women, at least in the context of Asian massage parlors, have a particular capacity to arouse, thus making them particularly threatening, existentially threatening. Their presence in these parlors, he wrongly believed, made likely his

“falling out of God’s grace.” This is what a recent roommate of his remembers him worrying about, that he was “falling out of God’s grace.”

Remember, though, Psalm 139, which would have us understand falling out of God’s grace is all but impossible: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night’, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

Yes, there’s another psalm that worries otherwise, which we just recited, fitting as it is for the penitence of Lent: “We were born guilty, sinners even upon conception.” But the fact of the psalm suggests that God will yet hear us, God will yet embrace us. Otherwise, why bother with a psalm addressed to the Lord?

Falling out of God’s grace: it’s a notion that puts limits on God’s grace, imagines the sin of the world being more substantial and reliable than God’s amazing grace. That’s just wrong.

Many Christians read the story of Adam and Eve, the garden and the serpent, for the answers it seems to establish. Among these answers are things about sexual desire and practice—that what is being prohibited here isn’t the knowledge of good and evil, as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with its fruit eaten promises to make possible, but something about sexual practice and so-called “sexual purity.” I don’t see it, but it is a connection some Christians make.

Other Christians, ones like me, read the story for what its apparent answers suggest as evermore abiding and unsettled questions. The longer you allow yourself to sit with this story, the more the answers it seems to offer only lead to further questions while also bringing to light fundamental mysteries.

For what it’s worth, this is what I love about Godly Play: it encourages a sitting and playing with the story, less for what the story will assert as answers and more for what the story insists upon as questions, insists upon as fundamental mysteries.

There are three questions the story in the text of the Bible explicitly means to answer. The first, and the least important, seems to be about why snakes move as they do, and why they likely frighten us as they do. The second is about why we must toil simply to survive, the cultivation of

our next meal so pressing, and toilsome, a need. The third is why childbirth is such agony, even grave agony.

These are good questions.

The secondary ones it further asks are even better, though also more nettlesome. Why are there prohibitions in our midst, things we *could* do but ought not to do; how might prohibition be felt as God's gracious love; and what does the fact of the prohibited do to us? How do gender, and eventually sexuality, play out in relation to the other? What are we to make of when partnership turns to betrayal? Whence comes deception, and why can it so powerfully speak to us, as powerfully as the truth sometimes? How does desire serve us, and how does it misguide us; and what of mimetic desire, when we catch a desire from someone else rather than discern desire from within or above? What is lost, and what is gained, as we mature from infancy to adulthood, and how does our relating with God, and with one another, also grow and change? Finally, what does it mean for us to know good and evil, and what might it have meant for us never to have known, and what it might it mean for us now to aim not know, now that we dwell both amidst God's amazing grace and this world of sin?

The difficulty of such questions only adds to their difficulty, now redounding.

Sometimes, it's just easier not to have to continue with such unsettling difficulty.

Yes, sometimes, hard answers are easier to cope with than difficult questions, not to mention fundamental mysteries.

As hard as the answers were that this man seems to have imposed upon himself, they were maybe easier than difficult questions, not to mention fundamental mysteries. This, in any event, might be why churches like his go with answers rather than questions, even hard answers, perhaps especially hard answers. When something comes as nearly impossible, it can feel especially crucial. But this time, the terrible hardness of those answers came as punishing not just him but people who likely had no idea what role they'd come to play in has tortured belief.

Eight people, a ninth still in hospital. People from Korea, from China, from Guatemala, from Detroit. An attack that rides a rising tide of violence against people of Asian descent, for reasons as varied as the apparent origins of COVID-19 to the long-standing fetishization of Asian women.

This week is the first week of Lent that has us considering a covenant not yet established, not apparently anyway. Lent during Year B, which is the year we're amidst, is a tour of the covenants that have come before.

During the first week, we recalled the covenant established with Noah, whose sign was the rainbow in the clouds following the flood. With this, it would be reminded to God that God would never again send floods to destroy all things of the creation, no matter how messed up the creation might become.

During the second week, we recalled the covenant established with Abraham, that he would become the father of many nations, of as many people as there are stars in the sky and grains of sand in the desert. This, though Abraham had done nothing to establish himself as worthy, neither practicing right religion, nor being from the right place in the world, nor being related to the right sorts of people, nor being in any way that might be recognized as right. This wasn't about righteousness or merit at all. This was about God's gracious will to be known and trusted in the world.

During the third week, we recalled the covenant established in the Law made emblematic in the Ten Commandments, the ten words or utterances by which a people might gather as a people. Honor the Lord as authoritative for his grace and love. Honor your elders for by this a people might be established peacefully for a long future. Don't be deceptive. Don't be violent. Don't steal from one another, and don't live by envy. A common practice that is light as air. Hence these ten words that have the power to gather and hold might also be mere utterances. Yes, eventually they would be, as it were, "set in stone," which is the irony of it all, which is the tragedy of it all. But the original covenant: light as air, light as a true word.

Last week, the covenant (which we didn't recall in worship) was a bit more obscure, the establishing of God's healing will amidst the people.

This week, we've recalled a covenant promised of Jeremiah, the prophet who had but a few moments of calm, who otherwise spoke through mostly weeping or rage. The people Israel and Judah were revolting, which I guess I mean in all manner of speaking. They were revolting against superior powers in their region, powers against which they would lose and to which they would fall. They were revolting to Jeremiah, who was often in an overwrought state just thinking about how far gone they were, no longer a people of justice, now just a people like any other people, into power politics and their own sense of pride but very little into justice or life. Worst of all, according to Jeremiah, they were revolting to the Lord.

For all of this, Jeremiah was in a near constant state of pique, with this though one moment of calm and clarity of promise: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when...I will put my law within the people; I will write it on their hearts. 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...”

Sounds good, right? That it should all just come naturally to us. That it should all be as easy as walking, as breathing. To be free to do the good! Think of that! No longer envious. No longer resentful. (Mind you, this is my wish list.) No longer sitting on a pile of intergenerational wealth the likes of which most Black people in America have been cut off at the knees to accumulate. No longer mean at the end of the day when I’m really tired. No longer worried about the man who’s living in the woods near my house, every day to trek to the grocery store for groceries. (I see him from my front window, and once, as I was on a walk with the dogs, Birgitta stole from his grocery bag one of his apples—which I’m really sorry about, man in the woods. Don’t put your grocery bags down to say hello to my dogs. Birgitta will consider that an open invitation.) No longer north of a border that cuts through the desert like a scar. Ugh, there’s so much I want to be free of, so much I want to be done with.

What’s on your list?

Christians have heard this promise of a new covenant to be written on our hearts as reference to the covenant in Christ. Christ is the new covenant, we confess; and, as such, he is somehow related to this promise Jeremiah put forth of the days that are surely coming when the Lord will have written God’s Law on human hearts, when no longer shall we need to teach one another about it and how to live by it. Christians have understood this as a done deal, some of us anyway.

Others, like me, look around and look within, and can’t see it, not yet anyway. We’re not there yet. This promised day hasn’t fully arrived yet. Yes, the saving work of Christ has begun. Yes, truly and eternally, the redeeming work of Christ might be finished. But it hasn’t yet been fulfilled in time. It hasn’t yet been fully realized in the living of our days, in the living of *my* days. I am way too rotten a beast to convince myself of that. I look around and see what effect I have, especially when unintended, and I see way too much rippling sin to convince myself it’s all absolutely finished, it’s all perfected and made whole, and I’m good. No.

Plus, we still have Sunday schools. In church, we still offer adult education and faith formation. We still feature preaching in our worship and expect our clergy to be learned—which you should expect, by the way, you who gather in pews, whether actual or virtual. And why would all this be the case unless we knew, on some fundamental level, we still have a lot to learn, there is

still much that's dark to us that we must yet discern. There is still evil that we still know, though as ever can't fully tell from the good. It's all still so confusing and confused!

For all this, it matters what we teach. It might *really* matter what we teach. People might be listening, desperate people, frightened people. Truly, people's lives might depend on what we teach.

There's nothing wrong with wanting desperately to be free of sin. What's wrong is when the church insists that we can be, we should be, we'd better be, or else. The simple, unsettling truth is we rely on God's grace, which is beyond our control, beyond our manipulation, beyond everything actually. But it is reliable. It is magnanimous. It is far greater than our sin is deep, far broader than the world in all its unfinished mess is wide.

Today is the 5th of the six Sundays of Lent. We're nearing the cross, as witnessed in the gospel reading. This takes place in the final week of Jesus' life according to John. This has us in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, in the Temple during that pointed time. Many Jews were there, of course. Many Greeks were as well, and some of them wanted to see Jesus.

In this gospel, John, much is made of seeing and not seeing. What's more, the professed desire to see Jesus is about seeing also the cross. That God would suffer the cross, that God would offer himself as a sacrifice, the sort of which we seem to think we need in order to be free of sin, the sort of which that man in Atlanta seemed to think he needed in order to be free him: this is what it is to see Jesus, to see that such sacrifice is not what's needed and should no longer be pursued as needed.

And the fact that these Greeks wanted to see suggested to Jesus that so did the whole world. It had come to him, the whole world, as he seemed to know it would. Now, not just Jews but Greeks as well: it had come to him, the whole world, in the coming of these Greeks. Everything would be gathered in God's gracious love. Everything would rise in God's self-sacrifice, Jesus risen on the cross, that we might be freed. Free of the illusion that such bloody sacrifice is what's anymore required or is in any way effective: the time had come.

It's been a bad week—eight people lost to us, many of whom lived precarious lives and so left relatives in furthermore precarity. It's so sad, all around. Really, it's been a rough year so far, following a rough year indeed. But there are signs of hope, signs of promise. We move to the cross that God's grace might pour forth that the day shall surely come, that promised day, when all shall simply know the Lord and his love.

It's coming. Meanwhile, it matters how we imagine it and how we profess it. So let's profess it in love and grace, as if the means to that end are also the end itself. How we get there matters as to where we're going. So let's get there in grace and love.

Thanks be to God.