

Written on Your Heart
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹ 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. ³² 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. ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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.

Psalms 51:1-12

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶ You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

We should not be surprised – it is Lent after all – when we find a theme of repentance in our readings this morning. We begin with Jeremiah where God’s power and ability to bring about newness is established, recalling the works of creation. That reading sets us up for the Psalm in which the speaker calls upon God to use God’s power following the speaker’s repentance.

In Jeremiah, the Lord says, “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.” The days will surely be coming when God does this. If we were to go back two chapters in Jeremiah, we read these words from the Lord: “For surely I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me...”¹ The people have been exiled by the Babylonians and all are crying out; God speaks these words on their re-creation. Although not explicit, I think it possible that God is depicting their time of repentance from the actions which they understood had caused them to be exiled.

We know that the psalm was written with suggested penitence, for the heading for this psalm is “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” Whether this psalm was factually penned by David or not, after he slept with another man’s wife, impregnating her, and then sent the man to the front lines of war to ensure his death, the truth of it remains: the greater significance is establishing a foundational need to repentance. One of the most notable hymns of repentance is *Amazing Grace*, written by John Newton while he was a minister, after a long history of slave trade and other abhorrent behavior. He wrote of himself, “I sinned with a high hand, and I made it my study to tempt and seduce others.”² I imagine our histories are likely not so dark but they are also not free of need for confession, of prompt for repentance.

There is much we can learn about our own repentance from the psalm. When I was a kid, and an apology seemed in order, I was one to go all out, bemoaning what a wretch I was and, hopefully, getting the one to whom I was apologizing to feel bad for pointing out my guilt in the first place. (Yes, I’ve made good use of therapy, in case you’re wondering.) It is perhaps why I found my own kindred spirit in Anne of Green Gables, who being called upon to make apology after Mrs. Rachel Lynde commented rudely on her appearance had this to say,

“Oh, Mrs. Lynde, I am so extremely sorry...I could never express all my sorrow, no, not if I used up a whole dictionary. You must just imagine it. I behaved terribly to you – and I’ve disgraced the dear friends, Matthew and Marilla, who have let me stay at Green Gables although I’m not a boy. I’m a dreadfully wicked and ungrateful girl, and I deserve

¹ Jeremiah 29:11-14.

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/pastorsandpreachers/newton.html>

to be punished and cast out by respectable people for ever. It was very wicked of me to fly into a temper because you told me the truth. It *was* the truth; every word you said was true. My hair is red and I'm freckled and skinny and ugly. What I said to you was true, too, but I shouldn't have said it. Oh, Mrs. Lynde, please, please, forgive me. If you refuse it will be a lifelong sorrow to me. You wouldn't like to inflict a lifelong sorrow on a poor little orphan girl, would you, even if she had a dreadful temper? Oh, I am sure you wouldn't. Please say you forgive me, Mrs. Lynde."³

This is *not* the kind of repentance we see in the psalm, and for good reason. As Pastor Charles L. Aaron, Jr. neatly says, "The psalmist offers frank but healthy acknowledgment of shortcomings, weaknesses, and willful disobedience."⁴ Why? Because the apology, the repentance, is about God, not about the one repenting.

Pastor Aaron continues: "Frustration over sinfulness and the inability to rise above it gives way in the psalm to confidence in God."⁵ Again, I will say from here that repentance is about turning back toward God. How else would we demonstrate this but by giving up the pretense that we can fix those troubled parts within us, by giving ourselves over to God that God might make them right and new? This is what Jeremiah's prophecy was pointing toward, what God spoke through Jeremiah. Professor Samuel K. Roberts explains, "In Jeremiah's prophecy the new will for humanity will be a result of something that God does – God will write the capacity for keeping the covenant on the inward hearts of the people."⁶

In giving up that pretense in the psalm, note that the psalmist doesn't make any promises to do better, for that would only continue to imply that God was not needed. No, instead, the psalmist, according to Pastor Aaron, "asks God to create the inner conditions that will enable better behavior and true relationship...the psalmist asks for a thorough remake, going deeply within the human psyche...the psalmist yearns for a renewal that invades deeply and causes change from the inside out."⁷ This is work that *only* God can do and the psalmist acknowledges this with the same verb for creating – create in me a clean heart – as is used in the creation stories of Genesis. Only God has the power to do the work upon us which we need. This is very humbling, in the holiest sense of the word.

The comparison being made in Jeremiah is between the power of God as God provided the stone tablets to Moses and the power of God in our very selves. Even when God's word is right before us, whether in a Bible or on a bracelet, we forget, we overlook, we ignore. Leading up to the exile, and for a very long time, the Ten Commandments upon two tablets became background for the people, white noise. They knew what God wanted, had once noticed that for which God hoped, but they did not

³ L. M. Montgomery *Anne of Green Gables* (New York: Bantam Books, January 1984) p. 73.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 126.

⁷ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 12.

embody what God desired. How could God make it inescapable? What covenant could God make which would be even more powerful?

Pastor Richard Floyd writes, “No longer will the law be engraved in stone and displayed in rotundas for all to see but none to follow. The days are surely coming when the law will be engraved in people’s hearts and displayed in their lives. No longer will the people know *about* God – all the right words, all the right theology. The days are surely coming when the people, from the least to the greatest, will *know* God.”⁸ *That* is what we seek when we turn back toward God: to know God. Within us each is that urge to know God, and to be known by God. That is the urge which brings us here. That is the urge which draws out of us heartfelt confession. Because, we trust, that God is written in our very hearts. Early Hebrew thought was that our will came from our hearts.⁹ If God is to write upon our hearts, God does not strip away our free will but, instead, God’s will comes alongside our own and we may choose.

If we choose *God’s* will, if we turn away from our own and toward God’s, then, our readings assure us, we will know God’s redeeming grace, like Israel, like David, like John Newton. God redeems. Isn’t that the story we’re heading toward in this Lenten season? God brings life from death. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: Create in us clean hearts, O God, and put new and right spirits within us, we pray. Amen.

⁸ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 124.

⁹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 12.