

Exodus 31: 31-35
John 12: 20-26
March 25, 2012
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

The passage from Jeremiah is part of an extended proclamation about the return of the exiles from Babylon. It is what many scholars call the “second exodus”—a reference to the original movement from captivity to freedom that led the Israelites from Egypt to the Land of promise. Indeed it is clear that Jeremiah is keenly aware of the connection. In the verses we just heard, God through the prophet announces that he will make a *new* covenant with the people.

It will *not* be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to take them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant which they broke though I was their husband.

Before moving on it is important to ask, what *was* this covenant? The traditional answer is that the covenant is the Law of Moses in general and, specifically, the Ten Commandments. Yet listen carefully to the first commandment:

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. (Ex. 20:2-3)

This not just a traditional introduction. It is a powerful link to what I suggest is the *true* covenant. The *true* covenant is the Passover. The *true* covenant is the commitment of God to liberate Israel *from* slavery and *to* freedom. The actual commandments are not to be obeyed for their own sake. The true reason for the Law of Moses is to give Israel the internal ability to live in freedom. The Law of Moses is a gift to allow Israel to internalize God’s intention that they will never be enslaved by any human power ever again. Obedience to the Ten

Commandments is to Israel's grateful response to God's powerful act of deliverance. The *actual* covenant is God's determination to deliver, to liberate, to save Israel.

Yet as the history of the people of God so tragically reveals, this covenant did not take hold. The entire wilderness journey is, in the words of Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, a "zigzag", not only of the forty year wandering in the wilderness; but also an emotional/psychological veering between the ecstasies of God's miraculous interventions and the despairing complaints about God's absence.

Any reading of the Book of Exodus or Numbers demonstrates this zigzag. God massively provides and it seems almost immediately Israel asks, "Where is God? Is God with us or not?"

For Zornberg, what Israel is missing is "a center of gravity to contain the zigzags: their volatile reactions to redemption." In short there is no center of gravity, no sense of equilibrium which allows God's people to weather the pattern of massive evidence of God's presence followed by long periods when nothing appears to happen.

I propose that we can relate to this pattern. How often do we experience some wonderful sign of God's presence only to experience long weeks of absence. Or, even more upsetting, following blessing we experience trauma, betrayal, violation! These polar experiences cause our lives often to feel like walking on a side walk during an earth tremor. We lurch from one step to the next with no sense of control, no balance with which to negotiate the unstable ground.

Without some inner center of gravity we are at the mercy of what feel like—and often are—forces beyond our control.

This, I propose is what God through Jeremiah is proclaiming to the people as they prepare to return from captivity to their true home. After a long and beautiful description of the many signs of God's blessing that will attend the return, God through Jeremiah proclaims:

But this is the covenant 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 to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sins no more.

It is this *knowing*, this deep unquenchable trust that God is faithful to God's intention to deliver his people that will provide that center of gravity which keeps people from lurching between the poles of ecstasy on the one hand and doubt and despair on the other.

Jeremiah gives us a rich image of this new covenant when he draws upon Psalm 1:

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
Whose trust *is the Lord*.
They shall be like a tree planted by water
Sending out its roots by the stream.
It *shall not fear* when the heat comes, and its
Leaves shall stay green.
In the year of drought it is not anxious,
And it does not cease to bear fruit.

I propose that the new covenant exists precisely here in this amazing insight: Our trust in the Lord *is* in fact *God's presence in us!* In other words, when we are able to move day by day through the very real and lonely and frightening periods of life trusting that we are not abandoned and alone—*this is Emmanuel, God with us*. And so it is that we somehow get up in the morning. We somehow do the next right thing that lies before us. We find water in the desert which sustains us and we get to the next day. We even find that we received blessings we did not expect. Indeed we receive blessings *because* we are not shut off by despair to the

foundational trust that God's basic covenant with humanity is to deliver from captivity to whatever it is that captivates us. Indeed the trust that God can and indeed has already acted allows us to experience that freedom now. This freedom is not primarily about the changed outward circumstances of our lives. It is about the deep freedom that my outward circumstances do not define me. I am a child of God.

Which brings me to Jesus.

Every month our souls are gathered around the table of the Lord's Supper. We hear the words, "This is the *new covenant* sealed in my blood...." How often does the minister repeat these words and we miss those two words-- *new covenant*? This is the *new covenant*. Can we hear in Jesus' words the fulfillment of God's intention to deliver us from whatever it is that we are captive to? This new covenant where we *know* Emmanuel, God is with us?

I ask you to consider the fact that through faith in Jesus we receive that center of gravity that leads us through life's wilderness. Jesus is, for me, and I pray for you, the way the truth and the life of the deep assurance that in life and death we belong to God through Jesus. For me and I hope for you, salvation has less to do with going to heaven than finding *in this life* that deep trust that is God in me and God in you.

I invite you as we enter the dramatic and profound spiritual movements of Holy Week that we think of Jesus showing us the way to that true center of gravity which will lead us through this life, and with utter reliability, into the life to come. Amen