Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent

March 17, 2024

Jeremiah 31:31-34

 The book of Jeremiah is not known for its cheerfulness. One of the websites I use as I prepare Bible studies offers an outline that includes sections with titles like “indictment for infidelity and a call for repentance” and “judgment and tears.”

 The story begins with Jeremiah hearing God calling him and Jeremiah protesting that he was not qualified. God dismisses the protests and promises to accompany Jeremiah in his work.

 The next 28 chapters are basically Jeremiah telling people what they don’t want to hear, and them ignoring him.

 But then…we get to the portion that the outline calls the Book of Consolation. Jeremiah delivers beautiful words of hope, words of promise. The days are surely coming when God will restore Israel and Judah.

 Our passage for today is in that section. It feels pretty straightforward. The people have strayed, having listened to false teachers, but God has remained steadfast and faithful. The days are surely coming when God will work salvation for the people, redeeming them once again.

 But the more time I spent with this text this week, the more questions I had.

 Like: What exactly is it that God is planning to write on the hearts of the people? What does God hope to achieve by doing it? Has it happened yet? Because it seems to me that we still spend a lot of time teaching people about God.

 I have one other question, but I’ll save it for later.

 The Hebrew word translated as “law” in verse 33 is *torah*, a word that can be understood in multiple ways. Here, it refers to the teachings or instructions of God, which are found in the first 5 books of the Bible. We often call them commandments or laws. But *torah* as it refers to law goes well beyond the Ten Commandments to include things like how and when to pray, how to care for those who are vulnerable, what to eat, and how to honor God through worship.

 *Torah* isn’t intended to be burdensome, nor is it intended to be used as a tool to shame people or make them fear God’s eternal wrath. The psalmists call it a delight, telling us that God’s teachings lead us to faithful living, to living righteously. As in being in a right relationship with God and our neighbors.

I think that’s important to remember here. Because I don’t think that a God who abounds in steadfast love would choose to write something on our hearts if the intent of those words was anything other than a means of living out what Jesus calls the greatest of the commandments – loving God with all our heart, soul, and being, and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

 And maybe that helps me answer my second question. What’s God’s intent with writing *torah* on our hearts?

 Well, if all of what the law and prophets point to is about love of God, neighbor, and self, as Jesus says in Matthew 22, then God’s intent must be related to us doing just that.

 By writing *torah* on our hearts, God would be making it an inseparable part of who we are, the filter we use for how we understand the world around us.

 Whether this has happened yet is a matter of debate. Some argue it happens in Christ. I see it as ongoing, that God does indeed forgive our sins and remember them no more, but we still need to teach each other and point to God, point to the ways God has been faithful throughout history.

 And the covenants we’ve heard these 5 weeks are part of that teaching.

 Throughout those covenants, God basically says, “You’ve seen what I have done. How I have redeemed you, saved you from what keeps you from flourishing. I’ve shown you the path to abundant life for all. Don’t be afraid. Trust me. Follow my teachings. What feels hard for you to do isn’t so hard if you ***trust me.***”

 In a sense, there’s two sections to the Bible. The first is Genesis 1 and 2. Creation, including humanity, existed in right relationship, functioning as God intended. And then Genesis 3 to Revelation 22. God working to restore that relationship. And humanity resisting it. Insisting on choosing a different path. But then suffering and turning back to God. Lather, rinse, repeat.

 What we have heard these 5 weeks is that God refuses to give up on us. That our sin is not stronger than God’s love for us. No matter how often we break *our* side of the promise, God is persistent, insistent, and consistent about loving us.

 And that leads me nicely to my final question:

 Why do we find it so hard to trust the promise here? The promise that God will forgive our iniquity and remember our sin no more.

 Sometimes, I think it’s just hard to trust someone you can’t see, sit down and have a conversation with.

 But for some people, the notion that God could love them that much is unthinkable. They’ve been taught they need to be ashamed of themselves because of their sin. They’ve been taught that they’re unworthy. They’ve been taught that God’s love and grace are conditional. They’ve been taught that God is a scorekeeper, assigning points for our good and bad deeds.

And if *that’s* what you learn about God, if *that’s* how you experience God, then it only makes sense that you’d conclude that doing the same things to someone else is how you love your neighbor as yourself.

But when we look to the model of Jesus’s life, to the life of the Word of God made flesh, who dwelled among us, then we see something different.

 We see the incarnate God welcoming the stranger, the outcast, the enemy. Declaring those who feel anything but fortunate are, in God’s eyes, blessed. We see him feed the hungry. Heal the sick. Share meals with “sinners and tax collectors” instead of judging or condemning them.

 And then saying, “go and do likewise.”

 We see him wash his disciples’ feet. Share a meal with the disciples who would abandon him that evening. Who would deny knowing him. Who would betray him. Offering them grace and forgiveness and love.

 Before allowing himself to be hung on a cross and die. Only to be resurrected and then ascend to sit at the right hand of God the Creator.

 ***All of that,*** to show us what God’s love is like. All of that, to save us, to redeem us, from all that keeps us from the abundant life that God has *always* intended for creation.

 By writing *torah* on our hearts, God will wire us to love. Make it an inseparable part of who we are, a part of the story that is each of us. Something we can never not know. Never not trust.

 This is God’s promise to us.

 And God keeps the promises that God makes. Always.