

Sunday 16th October

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“And now for something NEW...” Jeremiah 31:27-34

Who can tell me what this book is? Yes, it's the Bible, but what is the Bible?

I would describe this book as the account of God's work in the world and His purpose with all of His creation. It's the story of God calling a people, beginning with one man Abraham, who became a nation – Israel; who became the global people of God, the Church, and culminates in all languages, tribes and tongues before the throne of God in a renewed creation. The Bible Project describes the Bible as “One unified story that points to Jesus.” So this collection of stories by different authors in a variety of literary styles, written over hundreds of years tells one singular story. That's impressive...and exciting. And it's important because we're going to the Old Testament for our message today. We don't tend to spend a lot of time in the Old Testament here at St. Paul's but those were the Scriptures Jesus pointed to, and actually, we can only make sense of who He is by understanding the story that came before, paved the way, and foretold His birth.

So here we are in the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah's ministry took place in the period when the kingdom of Judah was on the verge of its seventy-year exile to Babylon. It was a terribly frightening time of huge upheaval. There were still those offering up assurances the everything would be alright, saying that God would protect them like He always had, and Jeremiah the prophet, was the one who had to keep repeating the devastating message, that “No, sorry, that is not going to happen this time, now is a time for judgement.”

This book of Jeremiah is a book of endings where everything that the people of Judah - this community of God's people – everything they had known was being turned over. So there's a lot of grief and mourning in this book as an old world is passing, and there's no new world yet in view. We also find a lot of anger and hurt here because that's how humans tend to react when a once-predictable, known world is being wrenched from their hands. Does this sound at all like familiar territory for you? How often in this Covid era have we heard the times described as "unprecedented," and climate change is now delivering extreme weather events that are being similarly described as extra-ordinary. The war in Ukraine is also impacting the globe in ways not seen in recent times and the threat of further escalations hover over the world. The notes in my Bible say that the book of Jeremiah has a message for us in the midst of a time when disillusionment has overwhelmed the hope of many, and grief and loss frame their view of the world. To quote,

For many, our age is an age of relinquishment and dislocation. The false gods are losing their grip over our imagination. Our misplaced hopes are being exposed for their lies. Now, where do we turn?

Those same Bible notes challenge us at such a time as this to not simply ask "Why is this happening?" but "What is God up to in all of this?"

As I said earlier, Jeremiah's message to his people was not that they shouldn't worry; he didn't reassure them that everything was going to be fine – not in the short term anyway. The kingdom of Judah *would* be conquered and the people *would* be taken into exile in Babylon where

they would have to learn to live without the main pillars of their faith – the temple, the king, and the land.

But there is a bright spot in Jeremiah's prophecy and that is the promise of a new covenant. Because of this, we know that in spite of appearances to the contrary, God is not abandoning His people or His rescue plan for the world. The covenant theme highlighted in the video we watched earlier, means that Jeremiah's prophecy of a *new* covenant was not an unrecognisable word spoken into a vacuum, no, it was heavy with meaning and it entered into an existing and still unfolding story of what God was doing in the world.

So let's unpack this covenant idea a little because it turns out covenants are one of the most important themes of the Bible. Starting in Genesis, God enters into one formal partnership – *covenant* – after another with various humans in order to rescue the world.

So what is a covenant? Most people figure a covenant is pretty much like a contract and so that puts it in the realm of all that is proper and legal and official. You sign on the dotted line. You agree to certain things and make some promises. You become obligated to make payments on loans or to perform particular tasks as stipulated by a customer. It's all very cut, dried, and clean.

But "covenant" as demonstrated in the Bible and especially in our passage today, is radically different. From the Call of Abram onward, covenant in the Bible is the lifeline of God's relationship with humanity. Now it seems that in the Ancient Near East you *can* find plenty of cut-and-dried legal arrangements with the various types of

covenants that existed back then. But when it came to God's relationship to Israel, covenant was always more than a transaction.

Pastor Doug Bratt says, "Covenant was life itself. Covenant was hope and promise and grace all rolled into one. The covenant opened up a future for all creation that would not be possible were it not for the existence of the covenant."

Marriage is the covenant we're probably most familiar with and this is where husband and wife choose to enter into a formal relationship where they bind themselves to one another in lifelong faithfulness and devotion. They work together as partners to reach a common goal – building a life or raising children together.

Significantly, The Treaty of Waitangi is also understood as a covenant. A commitment to relationship between Pakeha and Maori to build a life of flourishing together for the good of all.

This relational aspect is critical to grasp and beautiful to contemplate. It speaks of a personal God desiring intimate relationship with us. No distant, detached deity simply manipulating the playing pieces like pawns on a chessboard. This God comes close and communicates the terms by which we may know and be in relationship with Him.

Okay, so covenants are great. But God's already made several, why is Jeremiah promising a new one? Tom Wright explains, "When God called Israel to be the people through whom He would reveal Himself to the world, God was aware from the very beginning that the call of Israel to be the people of the solution was the call of a people who were themselves part of the problem." So those other covenants were only ever going to be temporary, stop-gaps until a better covenant, or

until a perfect covenant-keeper could literally step into the gap and keep the covenant on our behalf. Like the video explained earlier, Jesus, as God become human became that faithful covenant partner that we are all made to be, but have failed to be. Do you remember what Jesus said as He took the cup at the last supper? Luke 22:20 records, "In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Then in Hebrews chapter 8 the writer explains how Jesus qualified as the right one to bring about the new covenant; verse 6 says, "But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises." And so through Jesus, God has opened up a way for anyone to be in a renewed partnership with him. And when Jesus calls people to follow Him, He's calling them to become part of His new covenant family.

And this is what Jeremiah is talking about when he says that God is going to make a *new* covenant. It's not going to be like the old ones, this one won't be a law imposed from the outside, regulating external behaviour; no, God will write this law on our hearts. He *will* be our God and we *will* be His people. And what about this, it says "No longer will 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 sin no more." I hope that makes you a bit excited because THIS is the covenant that we're participant in as followers of Jesus.

We are the ones who benefit *now* from Jeremiah's prophecy more than 2 ½ thousand years ago, the prophecy that was realised in the flesh and

blood of Jesus. We are to be the called ones, we are the ones who are to *know the Lord*. This close relationship and intimate knowing of God is not just the realm of ministers, or church leaders or “professional” Christians – if that’s even a thing. Jeremiah recorded that *all* would know God. So how are we doing? Do we know Jesus better today than we did six months ago? What rhythms and practices exist in our days to cultivate our knowing and to deepen our relationship with God. Do we understand that this whole Christian experience is about knowing God, being in relationship with Jesus...and everything else is the fruit, or the overflow of that?

Now don’t hear me saying that the fruit is secondary or optional or less important. Even though I’m asserting that the vertical relationship is first or primary, if there’s no horizontal outworking, the vertical dimension is definitely in question. In fact, these two relational aspects shouldn’t be, in truth they *can’t* be, separated from each other.

The new covenant is grace for the relationship between God and humanity, but it also offers a kind of grace for our relationships with each other. Mark Olivero says, “It is a kind of vertical grace that resets a horizontal grace among humankind, that makes the common good more common.”

The new covenant *has* societal implications. Olivero explains,

The underlying premise of what Jeremiah foretold is God’s way with the world, God’s way of being. Grace. Gift-giving life. Economies of grace are economies of a heavenward mind, which reflects the gift-giving life of Father, Son, and Spirit. The dispersive beauty of this way of being is transparent in the expression “from the least of them to the greatest” (verse 34).

None is to be excluded from the ways of a giving people. This is the way God comes to us. It is how we should approach others.

Here we are this morning as inheritors of the new covenant that Jeremiah spoke of. He declared it in the midst of turbulent times to a people wondering what to make of their world. Though the circumstances are vastly different, it is nonetheless confidence in the outworking of God's story that will sustain *us* in the shifting sands which are our days. Remember this new covenant is the one that won't be broken because Jesus is the one keeping up our side. This is our assurance and hope when we're not sure about anything else.

The covenant promised that we would know God in a whole new way, have we entered into knowing? Are we enjoying the relationship that God wants to have with us?

And even though there's much about the world as it is that's deeply distressing, and as we perceive ourselves as weak and struggling as the Western church, let's embrace the grace of this covenant and pray and work for God's way in the world. That horizontal dimension where we care and act for the least and the marginalised and we invest in the way of justice and goodness for all.

As the world looks on, it's a pretty compelling combo...the person who knows God, and knows themselves in relationship with that God, and whose actions display compassion and conviction for those on the edges of society. And when that person, is personS in community, that is, the Church...well, it's a truly beautiful thing and an image of hope for a world which desperately needs it.

