

Jeremiah 31:31-34
A Return to the New Covenant

Looking back the scene doesn't really make sense to our modern sensibilities. It was 1546 and Martin Luther had just died. Before his funeral and burial, his casket was processed through the German countryside, traveling from town to town. And thousands lined the streets to observe the solemn procession. In some towns it was so crowded that even in the side streets one could hardly move. You would have thought a king had died. And that's what modern minds have a hard time reconciling. The man in the casket wasn't a monarch or pop culture icon. He was a churchman. First a monk, then a teacher...of Old Testament of all things. Hard for many to understand why so many paid their respects.

So why did so many people respond to that man's death? Why are we sitting here this morning in Crown of Life *Lutheran Church*? Why are we celebrating today the *Lutheran Reformation of the Church*.

Well at a time when God's Word was hidden away...at a time when God's righteousness just terrified sinful people...God used this man to point people back to God's Word...to the gospel...to the message that had been so long obscured. You see, he brought back the true nature of the Church's message...that there is a righteousness that comes from God and it is by faith from first to last.

You see, this is why we celebrate this thing called the Reformation. This is why we remember the man in the coffin, Martin Luther. It's even why we call ourselves Lutheran. Not because of the man. But because a return to the central message of the gospel which during the dark ages of the church was hidden...but God brought back to light...the glorious message that says God has made a one-sided covenant with you...a new covenant. God is going to act in this arrow-pointing-down-act of grace that you might be saved by grace through faith. The Reformation is all the return to this new covenant.

A covenant...a contract...and agreement. We understand those, right? We all get to sign contracts now and again. Maybe we bought a home or a car or made a business agreement. We understand making agreements with people. The thing is, though, when you make an agreement with someone how do you make sure the other person is going to keep their side of the agreement? How do you make sure the company is going to keep the promise some custom service rep made you over the phone? How do you make sure a business partner isn't going to back out on you at the last minute and leave you hanging? Does a handshake mean anything anymore?

I find it interesting that in the ancient world, people had a very pointed way of reminding one another that the agreements they entered into were binding. All of their agreement or contract they called covenants. That's the word they used. And the interesting bit is that when they talked about covenants they never talked about writing a covenant. They never talked about making a covenant. They always "cut" a

covenant. Whether you're reading ancient texts from the near east or you're reading sacred Scripture, every time they talk about agreements, they call them "cutting a covenant".

You see, in order to remind all the parties involved in the agreement that this was meant to be binding, what they would do is they would take some animals and they would cut them in half. Then they'd lay the bloody parts opposite each other, sort of along a path. And then the two people who were making the covenant with each other, they would walk through the pieces of the animals. And the unspoken implication was that if I break my side of the covenant, let me be like this.

You always cut a covenant. That's the way they did it. Blood made the covenant sealed. It spoke a powerful message.

So think about what that meant when 3000 years before Martin Luther ..., in the year 1446 BC, God does this amazing thing. He brings his people out of slavery in Egypt. He takes them on this exodus to head toward the promise land. But along the way he says, I want you to stop at this mountain...at Mt. Sinai...because I'm going to cut a covenant with you...a very special covenant.

The agreement was really simple. A two-sided covenant that said, if you be my people...if you honor me, obey my commands, give me glory...then I will be your God. I will put you in the land. I will bless you and protect you. And you will live long, happy lives. There's the agreement. God's part was he'd keep them safe in the land. Israel's part was outlined for them by God on those two stone tablets. The 10 commandments. It was a pretty simple list. You shall not have any other gods. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Honor your father and mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. You shall not covet. You shall and you shall not. And if you do that, then I, God, will bless and honor and protect.

So God's people heard the terms of the covenant they were entering into and this is what they said. **Everything the Lord has said, we will do.** Then they cut the covenant. Moses sacrificed bulls and caught the blood in bowls and it was sprinkled on the altar for God and then Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people. And this is what Moses said, **This is the blood of the covenant the Lord has made with you.**

You see, you always cut a covenant. It was the blood that seals it...that makes it binding.

But the trouble with any covenant is that its only as good as the people agreeing to it. It didn't take long for Israel to forget the covenant she had made with God. In fact it was little more than a month. Moses hadn't even come down from his time with God on the mountain. Israel broke her covenant with God. They bowed down to a hunk of metal. And they indulged their sinful flesh.

And what happened to this covenant they had made? The one sealed with blood? It was broken. The people had rejected God. And it obviously didn't stop there. The words of our first lesson from the prophet Jeremiah were written centuries after the exodus and by the time of the prophet Jeremiah the breaking of the covenant had become so habitually routine. God's people...the people of the covenant had gone from bad to worse. Their kings were crooked. Their priests were cheats. The people were lost in the sleazy fertility rites of the nations around them. I mean they had prostitutes in their temples. They had black magic in their homes. They sacrificed their babies to idols. These were people who had cut a covenant with God. But the problem is that covenants are only as good as the people who make them.

We know that too. We do. For all the promises we make to obey our God...well, we know ourselves. I don't think any of you are going to go home and worship a golden calf tonight. But each of us by our words or our priorities or our actions shows what we do worship...whether it's made of steel, or brick, or zeros and ones. And we're not going to find any prostitution in our temple. But do you really think our filthy thoughts or filthy phones or filthy lives can stand before a pure and holy God. And we're not going to sacrifice our kids to an idol, but why are we so willing to give them up to anything and everything the world will tell them is important? God says, you shall and we say I won't. God says you shall not and we say don't even try to stop me. Covenants are only as good as the people who make them. You and I know that well.

That's why God decided something needed to change. A big change. A complete change. God knows what we know. He looks at his people and realizes a covenant is only as good as the people making it. He saw clearly that there's no way you or I or anyone else could keep the covenant he made with Israel. So he decided to make a new covenant.

It's this new covenant that God was going to make that Jeremiah starts talking about in our reading. **Yes, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, although I was a husband to them, declares the LORD.**

So this new covenant was going to be completely different. Take a look at that reading in our service folder. What pronoun jumps out at you? You got it? "I"! It appears 10 times in 4 verses. This new covenant will be all about "I", God says, what I do. The old covenant, remember, the 10 commandments, what's the pronoun that jumps out in that one. "You". You shall and you shall not. You see, the old covenant was about you and what you do. The new covenant is going to be about God and what God did. Because a covenant is only as good the people who agree to it.

And God said, this new covenant...it's going to be a one-sided covenant. I'm the only one who's going to agree to it. This is going to be about me and what I do. This is going to be about an arrow-pointing-down-action of grace where salvation is not going to depend on you and your obedience. It's going to depend on me and my saving love.

[T]his is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD. I will put my law in their minds, and I will write it on their hearts. God is saying the new covenant isn't going to be about obligation. It's going to be about a total transformation. In other words, you and I don't serve God because we HAVE to. We serve God and do his will because we WANT to. God says he will transform you. **I will put my law in their minds, and I will write it on their hearts.** Listen to what he says next **I will be their God, and they will be my people.** Gone is the "if" of the old covenant (if you serve me I will be your God). It's gone and thanks be to God for that. Instead the God who does not lie and who cannot change his mind says **I will be their God and they will be my people.**

Listen to some more, **for I will forgive their guilt, and I will remember their sins no more.** That is maybe one of the best passages in the bible. You have a God who doesn't just forgive. He forgets. All those sins that bring us shame and burden our conscience, God says he has removed them from you as far as the east is from the west. You are so forgiven he says he can't even remember them anymore! You have a slate that is completely clean. This is the new covenant you have with God.

Now how can God do that? How can he just wipe the slate clean? How can the God who never forgets say he will remember your sins no more? Well remember what we said about making covenants. You never make one, you always cut a covenant. Blood is what seals it and makes it binding. On that great day, that Friday we call Good, God cut the new covenant when he put his son on the cross who would shed his blood for the sins of the world. On that day God cut the new covenant and proclaimed sinners forgiven because of the act of his Son. Covenants are always about the blood.

Listen to what Jesus said on the night he was betrayed. **He took the cup, gave thanks, and offered it to them saying, Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.** You see what we're celebrating in the Lord's Supper? We're celebrating the new covenant that was cut with the blood of Christ...the new covenant that was cut on Mt. Calvary's cross and was sealed with the blood of God's holy Son. That's why the Lord's Supper is such a central part of the heart and life of the church. Because it's God's promise to you that his covenant is in place...his arrow-pointing-down-plan of salvation is yours. He will be your God. You will be his people. Not dependent on your obedience, but only on the one who makes the promise and who cut the covenant.

You know we celebrate the Lutheran reformation of the church because there was a time when this message of the new covenant was so obscured that people thought they were going to get to heaven by what they did or how they acted or what they bought. But instead, God brought the truth of his gospel back to light again. God used a man to do it. But we're not really here to remember the man...he was as sinful as the rest of us. But we will celebrate that God used that man and the other men and women of the Reformation to bring back the truth that is so central to his gospel...that the righteous...the righteous don't get that way by what we do or how we act. Righteousness is a gift that comes from God because of the new covenant he cut with the blood of his Son. That means you and I...the righteous will live by faith. God grant it. Amen.