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St. Peter's Episcopal Church  
Lent 5, B  
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, lived one unhappy dude. He was angry, sullen, and indulged in what may have been a bit too much introspection. But to be fair, he lived in turbulent times. He was born during the final years of a mighty dynasty. His king was assassinated and his people lost their independence; his homeland was destroyed by pagans, the house of worship he grew up in and faithfully attended and which held immense significance for him and his people was demolished. His people were forced to flee and live as refugees in foreign lands. He had reason to be an unhappy dude. He was frustrated by the unrealistically high expectations that were placed on him, and beyond infuriated that he was not regarded with the respect he felt he deserved. He was thrown into jail for his efforts to do the right thing and fulfill his obligations, and at one point the authorities even threw him into a pit to die. Yet much as he wanted to give up, he didn't.

We've been hearing these last weeks about the various covenants God made with humanity: with Noah through the rainbow, with Abraham through his many descendants, and with Moses and the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

This week, we hear words of hope, and comfort, and restoration from a man who lived anything but a fairy-tale life: the prophet Jeremiah speaks of the coming of a new covenant that will be written on the hearts of God's people.

Just to clarify, a covenant is a holy promise with God. It is a promise of the weightiest kind – a promise that involves a person in body and soul. It isn't the kind of promise that we make with our fingers crossed behind our back and think to ourselves that we'll honor it when we get around to it or if it continues to be convenient to our interests-of-the-moment. It's a 'by-gum, I'm gonna give this thing everything I've got until my dying day' kind of a promise.

In Old Testament times, covenants were made in the same format as a binding legal contract. One party offered something in exchange for something else in return. *Quid pro quo*. During negotiation, when determining which goods or services were to be exchanged, the parties also discussed the eventual outcomes: the blessings bestowed if all went well, as well as the curses that would befall the one who did not fulfill their end of the bargain.

In modern times, we can think of the contractual process to buy a house: if all goes well, the seller hands over the home to a buyer in exchange for an agreed-upon sum of money. The blessing is that the buyer enjoys the rights and privileges of the new home and the seller enjoys the lack of burden for caring for a home in which they no longer live and no longer want. However, if something goes amiss after a contract is signed and the buyer is unable or unwilling to buy the home, they surrender their earnest money – a curse of sorts. Likewise, if something goes amiss on the part of the seller, the buyer can walk away and the seller is still stuck with an unwanted house.

In Old Testament times, a covenant with God meant hallowed favor or divine repercussions. With respect to the 10 Commandments, for example, God says, "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you ... **you** shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:5-6a) This indeed is the blessing that will come about if the people are faithful. The curse side of this covenant isn't explicitly stated, but implied: if they do not keep the commandments that God is setting forth and uphold their side of this covenantal relationship, it may be that God will no longer consider the Israelites to be a treasured people.

When one makes a covenant with God, the contract is signified by some profound sign or symbol. After the flood, the covenant was sealed with the sign of the rainbow. The covenant with Israel is signified through the two tablets of stone. The covenant with Abraham is evident in the birth of his own sons and the many children born in his line generation after generation. When we are baptized, we are sealed with a cross on our foreheads while the priest explains, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Jeremiah spread his message at a time just after the two profoundly important symbols of God’s fidelity to the people were obliterated: the beloved king had been killed and their temple razed. They had lost not just their leadership (and assurance of independence) or the preeminent place of worship, but to their way of thinking, they believed this was evidence that they had lost favor with God as well because they had not kept their holy promises to God.

When they were in the depths of loss and despair that had broken their hearts and their spirits, feeling guilt and fear as a result of turning their backs on their covenant with God ... this was the time that they were gifted with God’s renewed promise through Jeremiah: they heard words of God’s abiding faithfulness and continued blessing. The one who lived anything but a fairy-tale life brought assurance of a happily ever after.

‘Despite the people’s infidelity, despite corruption, injustice and exploitation, despite idolatry, despite all the many ways the people break their covenant with God – God chooses to honor God’s covenant with the people. Something new is on the horizon. God will bring newness from destruction. God will bring life out of death. God will bring hope where there is no hope.’<sup>1</sup>

God promises through Jeremiah not just restoration and reconciliation, but continued relationship – the same quality of relationship that God established with Noah, with Abram and Sarai, with Moses and the people at Sinai. The thing that amazes me most is that the promise of God’s continued relationship will not simply be external – engraved on stone or emblazoned as a miraculous banner of peace across the sky – but God’s promise of continued relationship will be intimately personal: it will abide within the hearts of God’s people. The sign of this new covenant, Jeremiah says, is that God would not dwell in a cold temple on the top of a holy mountain, but within the living temple of each person’s heart. God lives not in one place, but in all places – wherever people are, that’s where God will be, too.

There is an implication here that with this new covenant on the horizon, the old covenant is inadequate. God has kept God’s promise to remain in relationship, regardless of whether the people have kept their end of the bargain and remained faithful. Regardless of humanity’s fidelity to covenant with God, the blessings will continue and the curse portion of the covenant will never come to pass. Jeremiah is telling us that God is going to bring about a covenant that is so airtight as to be upheld on both sides by God: “I will put my law within them” (vs 33) and “they will know me and I will remember their sin no more” (vs 34).

It may seem at times that (like Jeremiah) our efforts to affect change in the world and be faithful builders of God’s Kingdom make little impact. However, God’s people have every reason to be a people of hope. On my bulletin board in my office, I have a quote by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.” Those little bits matter, even if they seemingly make no noticeable impact.

Earlier this week, Fr. Furman shared with me an American Indian folk tale that he and his wife stumbled upon in a book by the Benedictine nun Joan Chittister:

“Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” a titmouse asked a wild dove. “Nothing more than nothing,” the dove answered. “In that case I must tell you a marvelous story,” the titmouse said. “I sat on a fir branch close to the trunk when it began to snow. Not heavily, not in a raging blizzard. No, just like in a dream, without any violence at all. Since I didn’t have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2. Pages 122-124

needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,471,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch – nothing more than nothing – as you say – the branch broke off.” Having said that, the titmouse went away. The dove, since Noah’s time an authority on peace, thought about the story for a while. Finally, she said to herself, “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come to the world.”<sup>2</sup>

By virtue of the covenant we made at our baptism, we are called to speak up and testify to the promises that God wrote on our hearts. We are called to speak up for the voiceless. We are called to speak up even when we wonder if *our* voices will ever be heard. Jeremiah did it, as did all the other prophets. Sometimes, if we’re lucky, our voices will move mountains; and sometimes it will land like a snowflake. When we made our covenant with God at our baptism, we promised to work for justice and peace and reconciliation. We promised to be agents of hope and healing in a broken world.

Despite God taking on both sides of the covenant – God choosing to abide in our hearts and choosing to remember our sins no more – we are not relieved of the responsibilities we signed on for. We still have a lot of work to do. Our little bits of good matter, even if it seems they land as inconsequentially as snowflakes.

When we do the work of covenant-keeping, we are “not to count days or months or years, struggle or effort or rejection, but simply to go on until the work we have come to do is done, whether the need is finally, completely, finished or not. That can be finished by those who come after us. What is imperative ... to the meaning of a [covenant], is that we give our own life to the [fulfillment] of it. When we feel most discouraged, most fatigued, most alone is precisely the time we must not quit.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Chittister, Joan. *Following the Path: The Search for a Life of Passion, Purpose, and Joy*. Pages 138-139.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Chittister, pages 139-140.