

## The New Covenant Promised

During this season of Lent our readings from the Hebrew Scriptures have reminded us of the covenants which God made with the people whom God claimed beginning with Noah. God initiated that covenant with Noah, his descendants and all creation. Since that covenant was made with the only family to survive the flood, you might say that it was made with all humanity that came into being thereafter. The next recorded covenant was made with Abram and through him all his promised descendants, God promised a blessing would be provided for all nations. The redemption of Abraham's descendants from slavery in Egypt then led to the third and last covenant recorded in Hebrew Scriptures. This covenant was the one made which God used to try to mold those rescued from slavery in Egypt while on that wilderness journey to the land promised to Abraham. This covenant given while on this journey to the Promised Land God gave them guidance about how to live together as a community which would make them citizens of God's kingdom here on earth in that land. This covenant gave them guidance under which God was their ruler. As we discovered in our reading from Numbers last week, the people did not really respond well to the guidance given. They continued to as the text put it "become impatient and they spoke against God." Despite their successful entry later into the Promised Land, the history of the nation state of Israel as recorded in our scriptures is full of examples of their rebellion against God and God's guidance. This morning our Hebrew Scripture comes from the words of the prophet Jeremiah who lived after the fall of the united kingdom of David. He lived in a time of turmoil and exile; a time when the religious leaders had forgotten much of the ways of the Mosaic Law. Jeremiah challenged the theological undergirding of that royal religion giving oracles of judgment against Jerusalem and the kings and their rule. He argued to the people their hope was not in the kings of the house of David. He told the people that it was adherence to the commandments and the covenant of Moses, not temple worship which would be Judah's only hope for survival. Jeremiah's call from the Lord was defined as a call he received when a boy. From the beginning God told him that the message he would bring would not be simple or easy: "See, today, I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build up and to plant." This calling given to Jeremiah presents a dichotomy; just as does one of the verses from our reading from John's gospel. Dichotomies seem to be prevalent in our lives, but often we fail to discern them clearly as either or choices. Jeremiah lived in a time when his vision from the Lord was not recognized yet he continued to speak God's word. Our reading this morning comes from the portions of Jeremiah where the plucking up and pulling down have occurred. The people are now in exile and Jeremiah turns to the next phase of his calling. This reading comes from what is called "the Book of Consolation"—it is where Jeremiah begins the planting of seeds of hope for the future of the people. The context of this text is firmly rooted in a word to the exiled people—a vision for them to hold onto for the future. Jeremiah is looking forward here to the coming of hope for his people. "The days are surely coming," he says. What goes without actually being said is that those days are not there yet; there is still the present to be endured. The opening verses speak of the plucking up and destruction, but also of God watching over them, so there will be building and planting coming in the future. In

the long periods of time since Jeremiah, there have been many cycles of both. In verse 31, the opening line is repeated with an additional promise: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that 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.” Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the prophets point out the peoples failures to remain faithful; faithful to the Lord, faithful to the covenant promises that they made to live in a caring community; faithful in so many ways to the ways of the Lord which remain unchanging...asking for justice and righteousness. Here through the words of the prophet Jeremiah God promises that there will be a new covenant—a different type of covenant. In this promised covenant the people will know God in a new way. God will give them a new heart so that they will know the Lord, indeed all the people will know the Lord. The question then becomes for us has this promised covenant come. We as Christians like to believe that it has...certainly Jesus instituted a new covenant of forgiveness when he gave his life to redeem us...but whether or not the covenant envisioned in Jeremiah has arrived seems more questionable. If we consider the description of human behavior under the new covenant, we have reason to doubt that the covenant promised in Jeremiah has been fulfilled. Jeremiah continues: “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. We certainly have not reached a point where people don’t have to be taught the law...in this promised covenant God has envisioned this amazing, audacious hope where God’s law and reign is everyone’s way...this has happened because everyone is changed from the inside out...because hearts have actually been changed there won’t be any need for rules, regulations or laws of any type...no that promised covenant has not yet been achieved. The new covenant which Jesus has fulfilled for us that was promised by God in Jeremiah is contained in the final portion of that reading: “for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” Jesus has in his death given us a new covenant which he describes in John 12: 24 with this striking metaphor about his coming passion: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” For the grain of wheat to produce a plant and produce more grains of wheat, it must “die”. This statement conveys an intriguing qualification: “if it dies.” Dying is necessary for the seed to produce fruit. Soil was fragile and nutrients in it could be depleted even as fruit was produced. This is the dichotomy found throughout life. Therefore, the Jewish Torah prescribed a sabbatical year, during which the poor were to be released from their debts, the enslaved were to be freed and even the land was to rest in order that the soil might be revitalized. Prescriptions such as these for the health of the community did not emerge in a vacuum—they were needed because the opposite was happening. There is not any real evidence that the sabbatical year was ever enacted on a wide scale, probably because like most of the guidance of the covenant was ignored leading to poverty, abuse and desertification of the land which is an enduring part of life then and now. In the light of the idea of the sabbatical year, the dying seed is a striking image for Jesus to use to speak of his crucifixion. The great paradox of the dying seed is that the very place of great potential—the

rich soil—is also a place of potential exploitation—a place of depletion of the nutrients from the soil. The dying seed in the ground raises to visibility both the potential for exploitation and the potential for fruit-bearing and abundant life. Indeed, when Jesus says, “Those who love their life will lose it,” he is contending that life is more than just existing and surviving day to day—and certainly more than the accumulation of wealth and private gain. For Jesus, “hating” one’s life in the world means rejection self-love and exploitation of others. The fruitful and abundant life is one devoted to caring for and with others for the benefit of many. Selfishness and exploitation is the way of the world—resisting that way can be costly, exposing abuses of power and systems of injustice which exploit can cause backlashes. In the life of Jesus, we saw demonstrated the promised new covenant lived out; a life where God’s perfect law of love was demonstrated in the compassion he showed, in the borders and barriers he crossed, and finally in his dying to produce the fruit of our redemption. God’s promised new covenant is not written on all human hearts, but Jesus came and showed us the pattern for how to live with it written on our hearts, and to provide the grace to us for those moments when we fail. Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection which provides all we need. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.