

Sunday October 20. (St. Mary Metchosin & Abbey church)

Prayer: Gracious god my the words from my mouth and the reflections of my heart somehow participate in the work of your new and ancient covenant. Amen.

What a time to be alive. I have said this in times where things are so good (the jays), and when they are too messed up. I have also amended this for work and theology context and have said what a time to be church. It is a weird time to be called to do the work of being a faithful community. We are soon within the middle years of the 21 century, and collectively we are realizing more and more, that our colonial heritage, and the christendom model of being and thinking about church, is in its final stages of decline. And while this comes with it a reasonable amount of fear and unknowing, I tell you my friends, this is good news.

What is going to propel us into the future is not what has sustained us in the past. This is not a new reality, it has been in process for many generations. But the church in flux is not something new. We have within our broader biblical tradition, and within the Anglican tradition, resources to face the unknown future we are called to.

I want to spend some time today looking at today's passage from Jeremiah, reflecting a little bit about what was going on there, and making some links to us, here, today, and what it might mean for us as abbey church.

I tend to like the big picture. I think it is important when we come to a particular text we remember what is going on more broadly, both within the particular context the book is coming out of, but also within the larger biblical narrative.

In todays passage we see a bit of hope and goodness in what has been a pretty difficult book of lament and mourning. Jeremiah was writing in a particularly difficult period of turmoil within the history of the God's chosen people. They were stuck in the middle between two empires, the Babylonian's to the North and the Egyptians to the South, and it was not entirely clear who they should side with. Jeremiah up to this point has been faithfully mourning how things have not gone according to plan between God and God's people. They have not kept their covenant and have suffered the consequences of breaking their end of the deal which included the capture of the northern kingdom of Judah, when Daniel and his buddies were captured by Nebekenezzer.

This is not the first time this has happened you will remember. This has been a pattern since the beginning of the covenant between Yahweh and the giving of the law with Moses. And then we reach today's passage which is a bit of a turning point, in the book, but also on a broader level within the story of God and god's chosen people.

Let me read that part again: "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. 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.”

What is going on here is pretty amazing. In this midst of yet another failure and punishment that comes along with that given the current covenant that was in place between God and the Hebrew people, God is willing to throw that old one out and re-structure what their agreement means. It is worth noting though, that the law, doesn't seem to be what is changing, but where it resides and how it gets evaluated is what is getting re-drawn.

Instead of a law and a covenant that is external with many extrinsic motivations in place, punishments, rewards, blessings, and curses, the law will be placed within, or “on their hearts” and some kind of deep sense of belonging with will be the norm. Gone will be the days of policing and “teaching” one another, keeping track of your sins, and the sins of your neighbours, especially the ones that get on your nerves. In this new version God will remember their sin no more. In this new version, God is committing to the people in a new way, a way that is less dependent upon the external actions and piety. It follows the pattern we see regularly with God throughout the bible which is a movement toward grace.

The old testament theologian Walter Brueggemann writes that this change diminishes hostility that easily creeps into an external law, and replaces it with a kind of natural inclination where obedience comes naturally as breathing and eating do. The desire to resist and refuse, and disobey don't makes sense because the law resides within. The logic of covenant is reversed: when it resides within the hearts of a people the evaluation of how well it has been kept is drastically different.

It is almost like God is keeping the covenant— but is passing on the responsibility of governing that covenant back to the people. Like a parent who changes tactics to help a child internalize the motivations for doing good, by placing the covenant inside, God shifts where the motivation resides for faithfulness to be lived. There is a new level of maturity that comes with this kind of internalization.

There are a couple different directions that would be good to go in at this point in the reflection: Some thoughts on the nature of God, who would respond in this innovative way of grace to free the people of God to be faithful in a whole new way would be fantastic, including how this highlights a change in God's approach, and the questions of immutability, but we aren't going to go there today. Or, we could talk about the need to not read this passage and its new testament citations in a supersessionist way that hurts the relationship with Jewish people and diminishes the importance of Jesus as a prophet within the jewish tradition and our need to recover some of that same spirit for us today, but that isn't quite what I think is needed today. Or we could possibly think a bit longer on the implications of that cheeky little line in the passage that “no longer shall they teach each other or say know the lord” and reflect on how present that desire is still to have our ways of knowing things be normative for other people, but that will have to wait too.

Instead, have been thinking this week of the reading strategy of the theologian James McClendon, phrased in a slogan, “this is that, then is now”. This reading strategy invites us to read a text as if it was written for us here and now. Indeed it is a longstanding tradition of reading, one that Jesus employed regularly. Like the people who were the audience of Jeremiah's work some 2500 years ago, we are not sure what our future holds. We look at our

past, (as individuals and as a church) and we see mixed results back there, signs of faithfulness and signs of failure. We are prone to using external factors to measure how we are doing: bank accounts, number of people in attendance, strategic connections, twitter followers, etc. We are facing a present where we are once again called to internalize the way of God and shape our lives accordingly.

We are still facing the same question of what a faithful community would look like in the world. What can it be? what can it do? Jesus taught that answering this question involved a drastically different evaluation framework from how the world of his day was measured. The religious and political elite of his day had things sorted out with layers of external ways of motivating behaviours and determining who is “in” and who is out, who is good, and who is not. Jesus directly challenged these things, reminding people that within the new covenant (that Jeremiah announced) it is not the powerful who display faithfulness, but the meek. Jesus was calling God’s people back to the new covenant that has made its way into the heart. One that is more concerned with the folks who are on other end of the systemic privilege, the oppressed, the marginalized and the unconsidered. We are faced with a call for justice, and as today’s gospel parable reminds us, sometimes that involves being annoying.

As we are ready to go to the polling stations tomorrow may our heart remember the covenant that God has graciously allowed us into. May we participate with Jesus, who wasn’t motivated by the talking points, but by and for the least of these, that justice may be theirs.

In our collective life together as a church, we have grown blind to many status quo habits of being and seeing that are left over from our days where the Imperial Christianity project of missionary conquest was standard practice. We have healing that needs to be done, and those of us who are here in our churches have tough work ahead of us.

As we drift from the position of power and privilege that the church has enjoyed for centuries we need to remember that this new peripheral perspective allows new possibilities. Douglas John Hall the Canadian theologian sees this as essential for the church to take up a prophetic voice once again. He says: “From the edges of imperial societies a [community of disciples] possessing awareness of its changed relation to power can exercise a prophetic vigilance for God’s beloved world that, as part of the world’s power-elite, it never did, and never could achieve.”

So, my friends, this is the call before us. These considerations are what we find when try out the “this is that, then is now” reading strategy. We are asked to participate in the words of God, and God’s servants Jeremiah, and Jesus, to remember that our relationship with God, is not mediated through external forces of reward and punishment, but by love and grace extended to those who need it most. Not a system of belief, or of worship, (though these things help) but a way of being and relating to one another, that is known as love.

We must ensure, in small ways and through intentional communal practices that what we are doing is not so we can hold on to the final remnants of christendom, but directed toward living more fully into the calling we have received to participate in this new covenant. To live deep within your hearts for this community that is beloved of God.