***A NEW COVENANT***

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Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Four weeks ago, when we started this sermon series on biblical covenants from which we draw our name as Covenant Presbyterian Church, I quoted the organizing pastor, Dr. Herbert S. Turner, who explained the reasoning behind the name, including this nice summation:

*The covenant idea runs through the Bible from beginning to end. It is a word which best expresses God’s love for all God’s people.*

Over these last four weeks we have seen that love expressed in the covenant with Noah marked by a rainbow, the covenant with Abraham and Sarah to make of them a great nation, the covenant marked by the Ten Commandments claiming the people as God’s people and promising to be their God, and last week the covenant with David of an enduring kingship. These were all covenants initiated by God with people who had done nothing to make them worthy or exceptionally suited to have such love showered upon them. Yet in God’s wisdom, God chose to establish these relationships with these covenants with these people, flawed as they were. But of all the biblical covenants, perhaps none makes God’s love more tangible than the new covenant that we heard about today from Jeremiah and from Jesus.

Jesus speaks of that new covenant in those words Paul recalls Jesus saying at the Lord’s Supper: “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me*.” It is a covenant whose seal is as tangible as the cup in your hand and the juice on your tongue! It is an image that echoes the prophecy of Jeremiah: the promise of a new covenant with God’s people. That covenant was much less tangible for the people of Israel to whom Jeremiah spoke.

“*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*.” Those words proclaimed by Jeremiah to people living in Babylonian exile must have been sweet music to their ears. With the destruction of the temple, the dethroning of the king, and their exile from the land, the people were beginning to wonder if God’s old covenants were valid anymore. Was God still present with them as their God or had God abandoned them? Were they still God’s chosen people? Jeremiah’s prophecy of this new covenant reaffirmed God’s promise to be their God and offered a new way for the people to be God’s people. No longer would the covenant be dependent upon external signs – circumcision, the ark with the tablets of stone, the Temple; it would be marked instead by changed hearts. God’s law would be written upon the hearts of the people in order to transform their lives. It was the promise not of new land, a new king, or new rules for living, but the promise of new lives and a fresh start for people who had resigned themselves to a lifetime of paying for their sins and the sins of their ancestors. What was unclear is when that new covenant would begin. “The days are surely coming,” says Jeremiah, but coming when – next week, next month, next year?

As it turned out, that promise hung there for centuries, hung like an elusive golden snitch that always seemed just out of reach as the people waited for those days that were surely coming but had not yet arrived. Then at table with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus drew upon the words of that prophecy of Jeremiah to speak of a ***new covenant*** in his blood, a covenant that promised forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the kingdom of God. It is that covenant whose promise we repeat each week at this table as we share a cup in remembrance of Jesus and recall his words – “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood*.” It was his blood that was shed for us, his body that was broken for us. Each time we gather at this table to share this holy meal, we repeat his words and remember his love poured out for us. Every time we lift the purple juice to our lips with the words – the blood of Christ shed for you – we recall his sacrifice and God’s covenant of grace with us: a new covenant sealed in the blood of one who is the Son of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Our Presbyterian tradition is not one that is awash in the blood of Jesus in our consciousness, liturgy, or song. We don’t sing those hymns found in other traditions, hymns like *The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power*, *Are you Washed in the Blood?* or *There is a Fountain filled with Blood?.* You won’t find them in any of our Presbyterian hymnals over the last hundred years, though some of you may have sung those hymns in other traditions in days gone by. We don’t sing about the blood, very often, or even talk about it, yet at this Table, we repeat those words of Jesus about this cup of the new covenant sealed in his blood. While some of you may think that those bloody words too should go the way of those old hymns – which is to say away – there is a significant reason why Jesus refers to the cup and his blood in this way.

Within the pages of Scripture, some writers see in his blood a reminder of the sacrifice he offers for us in his crucifixion. In the Letter to the Hebrews for instance, the writer suggests there is no longer any need for sacrifice in the temple, for Jesus has made the final sacrifice in his death – the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, if you will. It is that understanding that sees Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But in Luke’s gospel and in these words recalled by Paul, Jesus is speaking of something different. He is referring to the long tradition of sealing a covenant with blood. In Old Testament tradition, blood was often splashed upon the altar as the seal of a covenant. It was a solemn act sealing a solemn commitment. Dr. Turner even references such a blood covenant in speaking of the National Covenant signed in Scotland by our Presbyterian ancestors – many with their own blood. Here, Jesus is speaking of his blood in that regard: his blood is the seal of that new covenant God is establishing with all those to whom Jesus came, which is to say, the world. As Fred Craddock notes:

*Jesus’ blood seals a new covenant offering a new kind of freedom, a release from captivity to sin and death, a new covenant extended by the liberating God to all who believe, both Jew and Gentile*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Every time we take the cup, we are reminded of that new covenant God has established with us in Christ – a covenant that frees us, a new covenant first proclaimed by Jeremiah long before Jesus’ birth.

Some years ago a group of high school students was meeting with my friend Bill Klein to “talk theology”. This passage from Jeremiah came up, and one of the girls in the group said, “*I don’t know what to do with a promise like this*.” “*What do you mean?*” Bill asked. “*Well*,” she replied, “*did God ever make good on his promise? Did God change their hearts?*”

How would you respond to her? To look at the current state of the church and world, one might wonder whether any hearts have changed. Is God’s law really inscribed on anyone’s heart these days, as Jeremiah foretold? Are our hearts changed in any way? In his letter to the Romans Paul tells the Jews that the external marking of their faith – circumcision – is meaningless unless there is circumcision of their hearts. To be a faithful disciple is to be one inwardly, not just outwardly. Discipleship is a way of life, not something you do. The change God asks of us is not just in our actions, but in our hearts; and from that inward change flow outward expressions of God’s grace and love.

There are a host of stories of people who found God changing their hearts in ways that changed their lives – some in this very congregation! Perhaps you have known some of them or experienced such change yourself. Jurgen Moltmann tells of his experience. He grew up in Nazi Germany with little religious faith. At age fifteen, he was put into uniform and given a gun by the Nazis in the dying days of the Third Reich. “*I was scared to death*,” he recalls. “*The first time I saw an enemy soldier I surrendered to him. I was walking through a forest in Belgium, and I ran into an Englishman, and the only thought in my mind was to get my gun down before he shot me and to surrender. I ended up spending four years in a prison camp – and it was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me*.”

In that prison camp Moltmann was given a Bible; in it he found hope and comfort, especially in Christ’s crucifixion. “*I was dirty and filthy and alone*,” he says. “*I was serving a nation that had been crushed, and my world and the world of my parents was gone forever. But in a man dying on a cross, I discovered the strength I needed to make it through my troubles*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) In the crucified Christ he found hope, freedom, and a future shaped by the undying love of God, and with his heart changed, he went on to become one of the notable theologians of the 20th century.

Not all our transformations are so dramatic, but some are. Others are nurtured over years. For some, God’s law is written on their hearts slowly over time, and for some it is written in one searing experience. But the law that is written there is one and the same: love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. And the new covenant is one and the same: in Jesus Christ, you are forgiven, you are loved without end, you are saved! This is the good news we proclaim from this pulpit, at this Table, and in this community in our daily lives. It is the good news of a new covenant in Christ’s blood, shed for you, a covenant that offers peace and joy in life, comfort and resurrection hope in the face of death! We are Covenant Presbyterian Church, because we remember, embrace, and proclaim God’s new covenant with us in Christ – a covenant that gives life, hope and peace to us and to all God’s people on earth! Amen

1. Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, John Knox Press:1990, p.256 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Play the Ball Where the Monkey Drops It*, Gregory Knox Jones, HarperSanFrancisco:2001, p.68 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)