

Sermon for Sunday, March 25, 2012 Jer 31:31-34, John 12:20-33 "Write It On Their Hearts"

A student went to his rabbi and said, "Why is it that the Lord says 'I will write my Law upon their hearts?' Shouldn't it be 'IN their hearts'?"

"Ah," the rabbi said. "The Lord understood how difficult would be for us to understand his great Word. He knew that the only way would be for us to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. So He wrote his word on our hearts. It is only when our hearts break that those words can fall INTO our hearts, treasured forever."

When the prophet Jeremiah wrote the passage we just heard, he was facing a people who had for a long time been estranged from their God. They had failed in the relationship.

Jeremiah could have simply said "you guys have messed up, yet again." In point of fact, Jeremiah did say that on a regular basis. But God gave him a different message to share with these wayward people.

It was a message of forgiveness, of faithful love, of promise for a changed future.

What does Jeremiah say God's message is?

"We're going to change the ground rules in this relationship. We're going to craft a new contract between us. The old one didn't work. You got overwhelmed by rules that no longer made sense. So we are going to keep it very simple in this new contract. The slate is wiped clean. I'm not going to beat you over the head about past mistakes. Suffice it to say, mistakes were made. But this isn't about the past, it's about the future. So no more rules. It will not be about rabbis and scribes teaching those complicated rules. It will be about you and me. Only you and me. You will feel me in your heart, no middleman. That's because I love you, and I think you love me, too."

That was an odd thing for a prophet to pass along to God's people...aren't prophets always about telling people to obey the rules to ensure a good relationship with God?

But here was Jeremiah, saying that God's message was that the old model hadn't worked, that there needed to be a new covenant. The word would be upon them...but how would they feel it, how would they realize what was happening?

Perhaps, as the rabbi said, their hearts would have to be broken open to fully experience what God was putting upon them.

Perhaps our hearts have to be broken open to fully experience what God is putting upon them.

This prophecy foreshadows the bearer of the New Covenant - Jesus Christ. The evangelist John makes clear that Jesus is that Word, written on our hearts. He begins his gospel account that way: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

And by the time we get to the point of today's story in John's gospel, Jesus is clearly understood to be the one who brings that new covenant that Jeremiah prophesied. But simply bringing the word is not enough. How do we start to feel the love that the word brings in our hearts?

What has to happen? Our hearts have to be broken open. And how are they broken?

A thousand different ways.

The theologian in me reflects on Jesus' death, a story that we will relive through the next two weeks very closely. Every time I read the passion story, it breaks my heart. I see this tired and aching man, with black and blue marks on his face, with whip marks visible through his tattered robe, with a thin stream of blood running down the side of his face, with stupid but powerful people asking stupid but damning questions. I see him, and my heart breaks.

The ex-politician in me reflects on the discourse in the political arena in recent weeks, with people using their religious beliefs as weapons against those with whom they disagree - a gross misuse of God's Word - and my heart breaks.

The pastor in me reads the story of the shooting of a young man by a local watch vigilante, not in self-defense but simply because he didn't want him walking through his neighborhood, and I think of all the times that Jesus was in places where he shouldn't have been...and my heart breaks.

And when my heart breaks, I feel God's word falling into it, Jesus saying "I will draw all people - ALL PEOPLE - to myself."

And I feel the healing of those words around the torn edges of my heart.

Jesus tells us that he is about to do something that will break his heart, and our hearts. He reminds us that he does it not because he walks with joy toward his death, but with great trepidation. He also reminds us that he does it for a reason - pure love for us.

Every day, we face bad news. It's on our computers, on the nightly news, on the radio. Every day our heart breaks. But if, through our heartbreak, we become vulnerable to God's love, it is worth the pain.

This is why Jesus is willing to walk toward the cross, to the horrific death of his human body. To Jesus, it is worth the pain to open up our hearts to feel God's redeeming love.

So in these next two weeks, as we approach the glory of the resurrection, we should not be afraid to let our hearts once again be broken. That is how God's Word, God's love, God's grace, comes into us in this season of Lent and beyond.

Amen.