

What is Indelibly Written in Our Hearts **By Reverend Litton Logan**

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Scriptures:

31 "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah,

32 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

33 But this is the covenant which 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 upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

34 And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, '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 I will remember their sin no more." Jeremiah 31:31-34 (RSV)

Introduction and Comments:

Rereading the Book of Jeremiah in preparation for today's message I thought about Baruch, Jeremiah's scribal secretary. Not only did he have to write all of Jeremiah's words down, but he had to do it twice, when his first scroll was destroyed by king Jehoiakim. My thoughts then strayed to the story of the young man who professed his desire to become a great writer.

When asked to define great, he said, "I want to write stuff that the whole world will read, stuff that people will react to on a truly emotional level, stuff that will make them scream, cry, howl in pain and anger!"

That young man now works for Microsoft writing computer error messages.

Sermon:

I think it is important to note that Jeremiah primarily addressed the ruling elite of Judah; that is, the king, princes, priests, and aristocratic opinion leaders. These were the people with the wherewithal to forge foreign alliances, economic and religious policies and practices, as well as direct military matters. The common folks, the non-elite and peasants, were on the sidelines, pawns, and often victims of the elites and their decisions.

I make a point of this because I want to anchor Jeremiah and his message in a concrete reality in time and space so that we may not think of the prophet and his message as a part of some ethereal or mystical time in a land far, far away and his message not relevant to us.

At the time of our scriptures today, Jeremiah had been passionately speaking God's words to the people of Judah for nearly forty years. He used vivid and often horrible images to convey God's message of impending judgment and doom if the people did not return to God's will and ways and remain faithful to God.

After Jeremiah's prophetic call as a young man, he was rejected by family, friends, his fellow priests, and most likely stripped of his own priestly status. Over his ministry, he was arrested, beaten, exiled, and threatened with death for faithfully confronting Judah's leadership with God's words of warning. Jeremiah frequently went through periods of deep depression and despair, when he believed God had abandoned him. He often saw himself as the personification of a

besieged and destroyed Jerusalem. In his sense of abandonment, he frequently verged on blasphemy in his critiques of God and in his protestations on behalf of the people in opposition to God's assessment of the people. (Jer. 17:19)

Jeremiah frequently asked God to vindicate and avenge him personally, but each time God's words overcome his laments and cries for personal justice. Yet, despite it all, he cannot turn his back on God and God's call; he cannot keep quiet about the general state of Judah's idolatry, characterized by what we would call the immoral political, religious, economic, and personal conduct of the ruling or governing aristocracy and their supporters, which caused many of the common folk to go astray also, as if they had a choice.

The greater historical context of today's scriptures is Judah's having been batted about like a ping-pong ball by gigantic, competing empires as these empires sought to control Judah because of its strategic location and topography along major north-south and east-west trade routes in the Ancient Near East. Try as they may, it seems that the leaders of Judah could not affect the kinds of military and political alliances that would protect Judah and insure its prosperity without running afoul of some major, foreign power. Each new political alliance backfired and brought with it serious repercussions.

Prophet after prophet had warned Israel, the now defunct Northern kingdom, and Judah, the imperiled Southern kingdom, about compromising their relationship with God in their pursuits of sovereignty, power, and safety through foreign alliances. These compromises were likened to the affairs of an unfaithful spouse. God, however, the ever-loving spouse has remained faithful, forgiving, and delivering the people from bondage, hostile neighbors, providing them food and water, and sustaining them through some rough times.

The evidence of Judah's unfaithfulness was seen not only in the blatant political, military, and economic accommodations with foreign nations, which often victimized the powerless members of Judah's society, but was epitomized in its worship of other gods on Judah's soil. The elite and the people participated in such worship, including various pagan fertility rituals and permitting the sacrifices of first-born children to the Canaanite god Moloch while conjointly worshipping God.

After the religious and cultic reforms and purges of King Josiah, which it seems Jeremiah approved of, but thought hadn't gone far enough, the Temple priest and the leadership of Judah came to over-emphasize the prominence and power of the Temple in Jerusalem. I remind us that the Temple or the House of God was believed to house the very presence of God. Many people believed that if the fires of the Temple sacrifices were glowing then God and the people were tight, and God would protect them and ensure their prosperity. In short, the people of Judah forgot the "if" clause in God's covenant relationship with them. If the people kept faith with God's Law and its moral and ethical precepts and allowed no hint of idolatry, then God would bless them; however, if they didn't ...well.

The establishment's pet prophets and toady, cultic priests assured the leaders that if they took care of God, offered sacrifices in the Temple, and remembered all the feast days, etc., things would be all right. At this point, let me refresh your memory about the meaning of the word cult or cultic - its original meaning relates to the care of the gods or in our case God. However, in the minds of the great prophets, especially Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the primary Temple, wherein a person was to worship and care for God was understood to be the human heart not just a building in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah in chapter 17:1 said that Judah was so bad and its heart so hard in its sin that it was as if, *"The sin of Judah is written with a pen [stylus] of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart."* In keeping with the spirit and intent of the prophet Ezekiel and his understandings of God giving the people a new heart, Jeremiah sees a time when God will

inscribe the essence of the Law upon the hearts of God's people - the seat of the human will and intention. In short, God's covenant with the people will no longer be dependent on external acts of devotion; now covenant keeping will find its affirmation and energy through a new, inward awareness and motivation. This new awareness will help the people know and keep the spirit of the Law as well as its letter. In short, Jeremiah clarifies that what is important to God is not rigid, corporate religious practices, but an individual's and the people's heartfelt relationship to God, which should precede any religious activities.

In this light, people great and small, will no longer be able to hide behind cultic practices or plead ignorance of the will of God. No longer may people say, "Hey, Lord, we didn't know, no one taught us or told us", or "God, we've performed all your required sacrifices, religious rites, ceremonies, kept all your feast days; so, why aren't you protecting, and blessing us?" "Lord, what does it matter if we throw in a little worship to Moloch and his consort Asherah, as long as we worship you as our high God?" (Theos Hysistos)

Something that is crucial in these passages that I would like to point out is that God takes the initiative to redeem the broken relationship and to offer a new tomorrow. *"I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*

However, the people did not heed Jeremiah, when he told them not to resist the Babylonians because the Babylonians move at the will and command of God, and eventually the people paid the prices for not listening - many died and the Babylonian Exile happened. However, even amid the people's suffering the consequences of their choices, we will again hear the words of God's loving forgiveness and promise of restoration from the mouth of the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah tells the people in Exile to settle down, settle in, and wait for God's deliverance and their return.

God's forgiveness and restoration will come not from punishment time served but from God's love. God loves the people despite their apostacies. As we read in 31:3, God says of God's people, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you."

The awareness of this loving-forgiveness becomes the advent of a new mindset in relating to God. A relationship predicated upon God's heartfelt, loyal care for God's people and not a relationship built upon cultic compliances alone. God's love, forgiveness, and desire to bless will now be an integral part of the people's individual and collective consciousness; everyone will know innately that it is God's great love and grace that lies at the heart of God's covenant and the Law, not God's egotistical cultic demands. This is the way other people think about and relate to their gods, who are no gods at all. God is a living, loving, and involved presence among the people.

In this new understanding, the people will come to "know the Lord." The word "know" here in Hebrew represents far more than an intellectual or factual knowledge. It speaks of the most intimate dimensions of knowing and loving someone.

In summary, Jeremiah has over his ministry addressed the political, religious, economic, and moral compromises made by the leadership of Judah; compromises that were tolerated and enjoyed by not only by the elite but by the common people also. Thus, in Judah's unfaithfulness the voices of the more fundamentalist prophets of the day, like Jeremiah, went unheeded to everyone's detriment.

I feel, at this point, I must ask several questions. Do we as a people truly understand that there are ways of life that are right and wrong, not just unpleasant or pleasant, convenient or inconvenient? Do we understand that there are ways of living and behaving that violate divine, moral dimensions and laws of the universe? Do we understand that when these offences are left unchecked or unchallenged, they often have an accumulative effect with disastrous consequences for all concerned?

Do we understand that not only are there consequences to our individual choices but to our collective choices and moral mindset as a people and as a nation? Do we understand that if people sit back and let the moral fiber of their nation and its people deteriorate unchallenged, we are all going to suffer? Do we understand, thanks be to divine providence, we live in a nation where the non-elite, the common folk, do not have to be pawns in the abuses of government, the elite, and policy makers? Okay, if we understand this, then we had better listen to Jeremiah, so that we may head off a lot of suffering for not only our nation and its people but for all of humankind and creation. In the process, we may also be able to preserve our blessed way of life while blessing the entire world.

The inscribing or writing upon the human heart the essence of God's laws that Jeremiah speaks about can be seen and felt in our time and in our lives in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who likewise suffered severely for his vision of God's will and ways. The Holy Spirit helps and empowers us, if we will allow it, to internalize the reality that it is God's love for humankind and creation made known in Jesus' teachings, his witness, his death, and resurrection that lie at the heart of the divine-human relationship and our relationships to others, creature, and creation. If people are open to God's Spirit, the Spirit will amplify a fundamental human awareness, which has often been diluted by human religious machinations; that awareness is a deep, soulful consciousness of the Other of Creation along with a desire for a personal and collective relationship with our Creator/Sustainer. As created beings, we long to know our Creator as God knows us and wants a holy and healthy relationship with us.

In the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we have come to understand and know that the ways of a healthy, divine-human relationship lie in the Law of Love. Also, the knowing of God's Law of Love and its blessings should incentivize us to spread the Good News and the hope and power of life it brings to others.

However, I want to stress that along with acknowledging the Holy Spirit's empowering presence to help people understand God's motivation behind God's laws - God's love - is God's willingness to forgive and restore broken relationships when they occur. That is a clear message in Jesus' life and ministry just as it was for Jeremiah in his ministry. The testimony of scripture is clear: God will go to great lengths, short of taking away our power of self-determination, to forgive the most heinous of offenses. Which, I guess, is another way of saying in God's eyes no one person, no one group of people is as bad as their worst sin.

Jeremiah knew this; Jesus knew this. Therefore, people of God, let us live as forgiven people, people with hearts and minds full of the knowledge of God's love in Jesus Christ. However, let us also recognize that our status as forgiven before God does not cancel out the consequences of our collective actions or inactions. God may forgive our intents and the moral and spiritual dimensions of our sins, but certain natural outcomes of human choice once set into motion must play themselves out even if they harm the righteous and unrighteous alike. We see this in our scriptures onscreen, where the Jews had to pay the consequences for their rebellion against the Babylonians.

¹⁰ For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. (Jeremiah 29:10, NRSV)

Therefore, we cannot hide behind individual, cheap grace; that is, I've got my salvation and to hell with everyone else any more than the ancient Jews could hide behind the Temple and its cultic practices. We all will suffer when our leaders and the people abandon or refuse to learn the will and ways of God. So, let us passionately and consistently proclaim what is indelibly written on

our hearts - God's moral and ethical injunctions born of the Divine Law of Love and Divine Grace in Jesus the Christ.

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