Jeremiah 31:27-34, NRSVUE

[27] The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. [28] And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. [29] In those days they shall no longer say:

> "The parents have eaten sour grapes,
> and the children's teeth are set on edge."

[30] But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of the one who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

[31] 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. [32] 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. [33] 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. [34] 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.

Gardening for the Spiritually Inclined

You may have noticed the title of my sermon. Please know, I am by no means a gardener. I take care of some plants. Those are not the same thing. I first got into plant-caretaking when I was in seminary. I started seminary during COVID, and I lived in a studio apartment on campus. The relative social isolation from the pandemic and the small living quarters left me slightly starved both for attention and outlets for my own attention. A friend took me along to Home Depot, where I purchased a snake plant, a jade plant, and some lucky bamboo, and with those, I started a small "garden" in my kitchen.

I must have been hungrier for a connection than I thought, because I fell in love with those plants. I watered them daily, I talked to them in the mornings, I would even play my guitar or piano and sing for them on occasion. My snake plant was partial to the Muppet's "Rainbow Connection." But the bamboo always seemed to grow a little bit taller at "Hallelujah." The jade plant never really cared for music… It got to the point that that same friend who took me to Home Depot later got me a mug that says "Plant Dad" on it. Unfortunately the bamboo was a casualty of a hot summer, but I still have that mug, and the other plants, today, nearly five years later.

The hardest part of tending plants, in my opinion, was knowing what was good growth and what was bad growth. The good stuff, I wanted to leave. If my plants sprouted, or propagated, I would rejoice. I remember when one of my plants sprouted a tiny little bud. I took a photo of it and sent it to my friends and said "Look, I'm a grandfather!" But if there was another kind of growth, one I didn't recognize, I'd worry. I'd Google what to do about it, whether it was normal or not, and the best way to tear it up if it needed to come out. You see, I was worried about whether this growth, whether it was natural, normal, or not, would inhibit the kind of growth that I wanted for it. Our prophet this morning, Jeremiah, tells of a similar reaction of God. He tells of a God that is concerned with bad growth among the Israelites, and of what God will do, or has done, to rectify that.

Would you please pray with me? …

As you may have heard, Jeremiah was a prophet. The jury is out on whether he is a bullfrog too.[1] We tend to think of prophets as people who tell the future, sort of like an oracle or a fortune teller. And to an extent, this is correct, from a certain point of view. But prophets didn't tell the future like Carnac the Magnificent, or Zoltar, peering into a crystal ball and announcing the future with glee or terror. Rather, prophets saw and told others about what was going on in the present. They spoke about what people in power were doing, what the everyday trends were, and where they were as a society in relation to their covenant, their relationship, with God. And they knew enough to extrapolate what was going to happen to them if they didn't change their ways. So prophets didn't read "the future" so much as they read the writing on the wall, and they knew how to react to it. So, Jeremiah was a prophet, one of the major prophets, or those who had a lot to say to Israel and its members about what they were doing wrong and how God was going to react.

As a prophetic text, Jeremiah is filled with references to God's judgment and justice. There are many harsh speeches, with some softer tones of hope sprinkled throughout. But chiefly, Jeremiah is concerned with the injustices that were rampant in Israel and Judah during his time. There was pretty rampant corruption of the priests, the kings, and the other prophets of Israel, all of which constituted the ruling powers in the political and cultural spheres of their day. The result of their corruption was rampant social injustice. The people most at risk were the most vulnerable members of Israelite society: widows, orphans, immigrants, the poor, and others on the margins. This was in direct violation of the rule of the Torah, the covenant that God made with the Israelites.

For these reasons among others, Jeremiah said, the covenant had been broken. God was coming imminently to judge the Israelites for their indiscretions, for their abuse of their own people, and for their ignorance of the law. And what follows this statement, of course are the warnings of this judgment, of the punishment that will come. Israel will be overthrown, and this will be a result of God's wrath and judgment, and what comes after will be God's justice. Can you guess what happened during Jeremiah's lifetime?

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[1] For the uninitiated: Joy to the World - Three Dog Night.

Jeremiah lived through what is essentially the demise of his civilization when the regional superpower of Babylon invaded Judah and assaulted Jerusalem, taking it over completely and destroying the temple. In the process of conquering Jerusalem, they either killed or exiled the rulers, priests, prophets and the majority of the population. At this time, in Judah, broken families would have been ravaged by grief and loss; those left behind would have had to scramble to find surviving relatives and a place to sleep if their homes had been destroyed. Produce and livestock were either destroyed or taken. Every object of value was plundered. Anyone with any authority or skill to help rebuild the society was dead or gone.[2]

And for those who asked "Why?" There were the words of the prophet Micah, whom Jeremiah quoted, predicting the destruction that came: God would destroy Judah and Jerusalem for their sin, and more specifically, for the injustices of their officials.[3] Now the day of Zion's destruction had come upon them. Surely, all hope was lost.

But look at what comes next. Look at what Jeremiah says is yet to come. You see, the phrasing of verse 28 of this morning's reading is actually an echo of an earlier part of Jeremiah. In chapter 1 verse 10, God tells Jeremiah that he is appointed over nations and kingdoms, "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."[4] The repetition of this phrase cements and signifies the completion of the prophecy of God through the prophet, and the transition into a newer age, one of hope amidst the destruction. And I couldn't help but notice the use of botanical and agricultural language. To me, that also implies a sort of new growth, a clearing of the way of the negative and the restoration of the beneficial, so that what comes out of the destruction is a healthier and more just system. But I get ahead of myself.

The opening phrase, "the days are surely coming," reflects an understanding of this passage as reflecting the end of what is, and the beginning of what comes after. God, along with Jeremiah, is concerned with what happens after the destruction that has been rampant in Israelite society. After the they have been tearing and torn down, and uprooting and uprooted, what do they do now? What does God do now?

There is a metaphor that Jeremiah recites here. "The parents have eaten sour grapes, / and the children's teeth are set on edge." The parents of the current generation, and their parents, and theirs, and so on, have planted sour grapes. The vines that they had, that they once tended to with God, have gone sour, and they've eaten the bad fruit. All of their children have a bitter, sour taste in their mouths. In other words, what the previous generation has done trickles down to the next generation, and even though they are not responsible, they feel the ramifications of what their parents have done. All of them feel the repercussions of the actions of those who came before. This demonstrates the way that sin and retribution has been seen for decades or longer: the actions of one become the actions of all, and so all bear the weight of what others have done.

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[2] From Wil Gafney's "Commentary on Jeremiah 31:27-34," for *Working Preacher*, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-3127-34-6.

[3] Micah 3:11-12; cf. Jeremiah 26:18.

[4] All direct quotations of the Bible use the NRSVUE.

But Jeremiah subverts this. He says instead that the people who eat sour grapes will have their own teeth set on edge. The people of God will not be judged for the sins of their ancestors. Note that this is not a shift in understanding of sin; the Israelites still understand sin to be very much communitarian. The actions of one still certainly affect the outcome of the whole community. If one person acts up, it is still the community's responsibility to correct that mistake or bear the punishment for failing to do so. However, the dismissal of this metaphor provides hope that the current generation, and those that follow, will not pay for the mistakes of their elders. They will be judged based on their own actions and merits, and they can live in hope with God regardless of what happened before. God is in the business of evaluating the systems already in place, and tearing down what doesn't work and making room for new ways to further develop and expand the covenant of God between humanity and the divine. And so God plans a new covenant.

I do want to be clear about something. The new covenant that God will make, that Jeremiah mentions, is easily read by us Christians today to be referring to Christ. In a reading along those lines, God is therefore abandoning the people of Israel, instead choosing to form a covenant with a totally separate group of people through Christ. Now I don't claim to hold all the answers, and I certainly agree that there are many ways to faithfully interpret Scripture. However, I would warn against such a reading being the only reading that you see as valid. Christ is absolutely crucial to our own faith. He is the son of God, the one who died on account of our sin. Jesus, his life, his teachings, his death and resurrection, indeed his status as the Word of God, who "became flesh and lived among us,"[5] are all critical to our understanding of Scripture.

But to understand the new covenant of God as *only* being fulfilled in Jesus's life, death and resurrection is to believe that the prophecy is being read to the Church today, not to the community of Israelites that Jeremiah knew. To understand the new covenant as *exclusively* and *specifically* relating to Jesus points to an understanding of God as one who only speaks of the far future. It points toward a God who does not care for present-day suffering, sin, and repentance. But we know that God is bigger than this. We know, Jeremiah knew, Micah knew, and of course, Christ knew, that God pays attention to the people of every age. It is clear that Jeremiah's new covenant is made with the houses of Israel and Judah.

Jeremiah is speaking to his contemporaries about a relationship with the God who knows them *now*. Remember that Jeremiah is a prophet, not only speaking of the future, but the present. Not just the future, not just the past, but the *present* is a critical time in the life of this community. God speaks to them as they are. And Jeremiah's prophecy doesn't need to be just a foretelling of the far off future; it has real and reasonable meaning within the context of its time.

Nothing about God's language specifies that this will be a different covenant in terms of content. Rather, it will be different in terms of acceptance and faithfulness, or fidelity. In fact, the covenant that is mentioned in verse 32 describes the covenant of God made at Mt. Sinai to Moses, in which Moses received the 10 Commandments after the Israelites were led out of

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[5] John 1:14.

bondage and slavery in Egypt. Jesus himself affirms that this law still holds in his time, and that he came not to abolish the law, but to bring their meaning to light.[6] This covenant that Jeremiah speaks of is better understood as a renewed covenant between God and Israel.

The new covenant does not overwrite what came before, just like the covenants that God made with Noah, Abraham, Moses, or David didn't negate what came before. The people of Israel do not receive new teachings or new laws. But the teachings of God will now be written on their hearts. The law will be internalized within them, no longer taught from external sources, but intrinsically understood by each person in relationship with God. The covenant will be expanded to include even more people, and include their whole selves in joyous and radical relationship with the God of the great and small, in new and exciting ways. God is an innovator. God innovates in the way that the law will be communicated to the people, and introduces a new way of relating between people and between the people and God. God continues to develop new ways of being in relationship with God's people.

I'd like to revisit verse 32. God says that God took the Israelites "by the hand," and "was their husband." Although the translation that we read this morning, the New Revised Standard Version, translates the Hebrew as "I was their husband," the original phrase is perhaps more literally translated as "I married them," or "I was married to them." Either way, the emphasis of the phrase is on knowing God and being known by God, as though in an intimate relationship. What a tender image of God! How tenderly God treats the people who remain, writing the law on their hearts, making it easier for them to know and be known by God. In doing so, God will be their God once again, and they will be God's people. And when all is said and done, God will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. The slate will be wiped clean, and they will be a holy people once again.

In all of this, God is willing to do what must be done to make it easier for the Israelites to follow God more authentically, more fully, and as a more unified people. God is willing to remove the corrupt, the ones who inhibited good growth towards God and one another. God is willing to make something new with them, not in place of the old, but as a supplement to it. God makes something that complements what is already in place, and has empowered the people of God to tear down what is unjust. Lest we jump ahead to the future when all of this is changed, let us not forget that God still has a message for the here and now, not simply what is to be. God speaks to Jeremiah in his own time, just as God speaks to us in our time, as well.

What tenderness God has when interacting with the people of God! How the Lord leads them by the hand out of danger, how God rewrites the rules of the law to be more intuitively followed! Even after destruction, God is concerned with their growth. Look, how God continues to remain with the people! Even after destruction, God remains. God initiates a renewed relationship with the people, one that is stronger, clearer, and more ingrained in our hearts than before. It is never too late, and there is no one and nothing that is beyond the pale of God's grace, God's forgiveness, and God's love.

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[6] Matthew 5:17-18.

And in the final verse, God equips God's people to do the same. As a gardener with pruning shears trims away the excess so that new life can grow, or pulls up weeds to make way for good things to be planted, or sows seeds that will grow into healthy new blooms, so God tears down the systems that stifle connection and understanding between people and between humans and God. Christ did the same, lifting up the poor in spirit, the meek, and the outcast. Christ advocated, just like Jeremiah, for the reversal of fortunes of all kinds, so that those who take advantage of the poor, widows, orphans, immigrants, will face justice at the hand of God. Jesus participated in destroying systems that got in the way of what is good and right in God's sight. In following Christ, the one who is called Emmanuel, which means "God with us," who *is* God with us, we are called to do the same.

Perhaps the simplest and most striking fact of all is that God forgives. God forgives the people for the actions of those who came before, and judges on their own merits. God enters into a new relationship, taking heed of what came before and creating new structures to make it more equitable for the people of God. God forgives. Therefore we need to, as well. If there is nothing that exists outside the reach or scope of God's restoration and reconciliation and justice, then there must be nothing outside of our own grace. Let us rejoice and be glad in this grace that God gives us, in this law that is written on our hearts. Let us share it, as Christ did, in all that we do. Let us be empowered by the Spirit in bringing this grace to all the world by our actions and our lives, and if absolutely necessary, our words. Amen.