

The New Covenant

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 6, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It 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. ³³But 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. ³⁴No 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.

Luke 22:15-20 (NRSV)

¹⁴When the hour came, he [Jesus] took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

Hinges to Understanding

All of the Bible is God’s word, inspired by him and “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16) ~ but it is not all equally useful. Today’s passages play pivotal roles in telling the biblical story. They are like hinges opening a door to understanding God’s character, will, and purposes.

The New Covenant

Two weeks ago, our scripture passage was the Ten Commandments.¹ We saw that God had made a covenant with his chosen people after saving them from slavery in Egypt and that the Ten Commandments, written on stone tablets, lay at the heart of God’s instruction for his people. Though the Israelites cherished God’s law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unable to live as God had taught them. They proved unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

Nonetheless, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his law, his instruction to

Jeremiah

One of the great prophets of Israel, Jeremiah’s public ministry spanned the last five kings of Israel. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587BC, Jeremiah went to Egypt in exile.

Jeremiah was the greatest spiritual personality in Israel during a time of great chaos and decline. Though by temperament he was gentle and compassionate, Jeremiah never softened his warnings about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews. He brought them God’s call to stay faithful to God and his law, rather than trust in the outward trappings of the temple system. At the same time, he brought glorious images of God’s faithfulness, as in today’s passage.

¹ All of the past Sermon Background Studies are available on-line at www.standrewcccl.org. Just click on “Sermon Background Studies” and you’ll be taken to the right page. There is much more on today’s passage from Jeremiah in the Sermon Background Study entitled “Our Relationship with Jesus Christ,” from August 18, 2002.

them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God's people would no longer even have to teach other about God, for they would all know God. God would forgive their wickedness and not even remember their sin. This would be God's new covenant with his people.

The Last Supper and the New Covenant

Symbols can be emotionally powerful, sometimes enormously so. In his ministry, Jesus' actions were often powerfully symbolic. He ate with the oppressed and despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in the coming of God's kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God's kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover Festival in the days before his death, he went to the temple overturning tables and invoking, in words and action, Jeremiah's judgment on the temple system. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

The Passover

In the book of Exodus, when Moses confronts the Egyptian Pharaoh demanding freedom for the Hebrews, the Pharaoh refuses. Assorted plagues fall on Egypt but the Pharaoh won't relent. Finally, Moses tells Pharaoh that unless he changes his mind, all the first-born of Egypt will die. But, tragically, Pharaoh's heart has hardened and so this final, horrible plague comes. As their savior, God has told the Hebrews what they must do to be "passed over" by this last plague. They are to put the blood of an unblemished lamb around the doorway to their home and share a meal of the roasted lamb and unleavened bread. After the death of Egypt's first-born, Pharaoh allows the Hebrews to go.

God instructed his people that every spring they were to celebrate the Festival of Passover, including the meal of a sacrificed, unblemished lamb and unleavened bread, as a "day of remembrance" so the people would never forget that God had saved them – again.

When Jesus comes to Jerusalem for what would be the last week of his life, he comes to celebrate Passover. The Last Supper is the Passover meal shared by Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Because of the large crowds in Jerusalem² for festival, Jesus and his disciple had stayed in Bethany, a "suburb." Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. Here, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the "bread of affliction,"³ (Deut 16:3). Now, Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. Now, Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the "mediator of a better covenant . . . enacted through better promises" (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus' own blood. Is it any wonder that early Christians came to embrace the sacredness of the Lord's Supper? (See 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 for the tradition about the Lord's Supper passed on to Paul. Paul's letter was written before any of the Gospels.)

Written on our hearts!

Mack Stokes, a retired Methodist Bishop, wrote that Communion "awakens a holy memory of what Jesus has done for us and for the whole world . . . this sacrament is a celebration of God's redeeming love and empowering grace."⁴ We are people of the new covenant. God has put within us a new heart and a new Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26). We may not always feel this way or act like it, but we are not alone. God is with us – comforting, guiding, strengthening, and loving.

² The population of Jerusalem was about 60,000 in Jesus' day, but could swell to nearly 200,000 during major festivals.

³ God instructed the Israelites to use unleavened bread at Passover to remind them of their hasty departure from Egypt. Unleavened bread is bread made without yeast. It takes time for yeast to do its magic, making the bread rise.

⁴ Mack B. Stokes, *Major United Methodist Beliefs*, Abingdon Press. This book is available at Cokesbury and is an excellent introduction to the common heritage of United Methodists. It has been through many printings and a couple of editions!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Day 1 Exodus 11:9 – 12:51 God’s plague passes over the first-born of Israel; God institutes a festival of remembrance</p> | <p>Day 2 Ezekiel 36:22-37:14 God promises to restore his people, putting his Spirit in them and giving them new hearts</p> |
| <p>Day 3 Matthew 26:17-30 Matthew’s account of the Last Supper.</p> | <p>Day 4 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Paul instructs the church in Corinth about the Lord’s Supper</p> |
| <p>Day 5 Hebrews 8:6-13; 9:11-22 The author of Hebrews interprets the new covenant and the use of Jesus’ own blood. Note that Jeremiah is quoted at length!</p> | <p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p> |

