**Sermon for March 17, 2024 Jeremiah 31:31-34 “Core Covenant”**

*“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to**them,” declares the LORD. “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”*

Christina is always in the market for a new computer. And this is for three reasons: she really uses every feature, every nook and cranny of the current machine. Computers age quickly when they work as hard as she does. Secondly, newer programs and platforms will always require more memory and power than a more aged computer can provide. But the principle reason for her vigilance is because of the industry reality known as planned obsolescence.

We’ve all heard the term, and we all know what it implies. Things are deliberately designed to fail, or wear out, or become unusable or unfashionable. We grit our teeth and buy the new thing, time after time. The new gizmo is usually an improvement over the previous one, although not always. It is part of the way of the world, to be endured or celebrated, depending on who you are, consumer of producer.

Interestingly, this concept is not new at all. It first shows up in our American business literature in the early 1930’s, but it shows up in the Scriptures way earlier than that, in the form we have just heard, which is around 2600 years old. Jeremiah wrote of planned obsolescence – only in this case, God is the planner, and what becomes obsolete is the temple. For what need would there be of a temple, and its teaching function, if everyone knew God already, from within, and had no need of classes or instruction or worship services?

We Christians view ourselves as inheritors of this new covenant, this new version of spiritual living. We have absorbed the Hebrew Scriptures into our Bible, and the promises made to them we seek in our own lives. Their Messiah became our Savior; their suffering servant became our Jesus of Nazareth. And like most owners of the latest wonderfulness, we want it to be the best ever, for all time, but that is not the way of things, is it? It was about 600 years from Jeremiah to Jesus, and then about six hundred more years from Jesus to Mohammed, when Islam proclaimed itself the most updated version of the desert-born faith, new and improved and perfected. All three of the Abrahamic faiths have endured schisms and divisions into smaller versions, each claiming in its own time to be the most truthful, the most up to date. Then in the early 1800’s a prophetic young man by the name of Joseph Smith had visions and dreams, and a new form of the faith emerged in Mormonism, which now claims over 15 million adherents worldwide.

In between Jesus and Mohammed we must take note of Saint Patrick, whose legacy we celebrate today. He was instrumental in bringing the Christian faith to Ireland, and it was a tough sell, because the old ways were rich in symbolism and superstition, and did not go away easily. And like most successful church starts, he had to make some compromises with his flock, who were quite certain about fairies and leprechauns and other wee people. But the Celtic Christianity that has grown from his original plantings is rich and deep, with a love of God’s creation that is rarely seen, no matter whether the wee beasties are mentioned in Holy Writ or nay!

What is God up to, here? How will the abundance of synagogues, churches, mosques, temples,, and rings of standing stones bring to pass this sudden and startling new world where everyone knows God, from the inside out, with no need of external guidance? How will all these apparently conflicting religious systems yield a people who have the law written on their hearts, and encoded in their minds? I have entitled these remarks “Core Covenant” because this new agreement will not be administered by our minds, will not be legislated by our gatherings, will not be subject to the world’s notion of what a good idea is. The agreement between us and God is a heart thing, and the Latin ‘core’ means heart, of course.

The divine plan seems like, as they say in the country, a long way around the barn, but it also makes a sweet kind of sense. For the very foundation of the new covenant described by Jeremiah is forgiveness, grace, and the ability to allow others to think for themselves and interpret the ways of God individually. Maybe having so many subsets of the truth all on earth at the same time will finally get us to see that, although each of us has a delicious slice of pie, none of us has the whole pie. Maybe God is just too big to be understood and explained by any one religious system.

Feeling this way, as I do, you can see why being ecumenical comes easily to me. I look forward to the day promised by Jeremiah, a day when we will not see ourselves as God’s Jewish children, or God’s Christian children, or God’s Islamic children, or God’s Mormon children, but just as God’s children. For us, here, the truth of God comes to us most boldly and completely through the life and teaching of Jesus. Excellent! But it is not so for all people, and I am increasingly okay with that. God has many messengers, it seems to me, and the more we have, the sooner we arrive together in the place of grace and forbearance that God has designed for the world.

And here’s the best part: to seal the new covenant, God does what any great human doctor or scientist must do in an experimental situation; they offer themselves into the experiment. They model the effect of the new way, the new chemistry; they take the risk of being the first. And so God offers the forgiveness of wickedness and the forgetting of sins, mistakes, wrongs done intentionally or done without awareness. God lets it all go, to encourage us to do the same. Hard to believe that all the bloodshed, all the violence, all the awful havoc wreaked in the name of defending our version of God can be forgotten, but God evidently has both the capacity and the inclination to do so, and we must develop that capacity ourselves or perish.

The ongoing carnage in the Holy Land makes all of this seem like quite a long shot. The combatants over there have been misunderstanding one another since the beginning of recorded history, with each side striving to outdo the other in awfulness. And so I can’t help but refresh for you the old, old, pre-Jesus story of the angels sitting in the ramparts of Heaven, having a grand old celebration after completely annihilating the Egyptian army as they crossed the mysteriously parted Red Sea. “We really showed them! They won’t mess with the chosen people again anytime soon!” And they were so excited with their gleeful revenge that they failed to notice that God had entered the space, and when they looked up, the Almighty looked very sad. “Angels, you have disappointed me today. You are hereby discharged from my service.” Crestfallen, they inquired after God, “but…but…didn’t we do a good job smiting those wicked Egyptians?” And God shook a weary head, and quietly affirmed, “Those wicked Egyptians were my children, too.”

The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will launch a new way of living and being and doing. It will not be based in competition, in bloody wars designed to make one version of me superior over another. The days are coming when you will grow up and stop pounding on each other and realize that you are my family, all of you. All of you, my wayward, headstrong children. ALL OF YOU! And our new family rule will be based, not in belligerent self-righteousness, but in compassion and graciousness. And that is the new covenant I propose; that we will be one family again, brothers and sisters of the heart, of the *core*.

I know that this interpretation of the scripture will not be everyone’s cup of tea. Many Christians whom I love would probably think I am selling out, letting the ways of the world interfere with my devotion to Jesus above all. But I cannot faithfully buy into the idea that everyone in the entire world has to understand God through the teaching of a first century prophet and teacher from Nazareth. God is too big, the world is too big, and the human suffering caused by vaunting our way above all other ways has been incalculable. I offer for your consideration a possibly sounder truth; that God is at work in a gazillion ways, some of which are Christian, yet some of which are not, but all of which will bring about God’s purpose, the peaceful reunion of the human family. And maybe we can assist God in this planned obsolescence by letting go of our fanatical brand loyalty in order to see the larger picture. Friends, I don’t think it really matters to God if I am a Methodist, or possibly even a Christian. What matters to God is that I find the life of grace and tolerance and inclusion and compassion and joy that is my birthright as a child of God’s universal family. And that I help others find their way back into the family, too. That is my core covenant. Amen.