



Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

Good morning, and happy Spring, everyone! Thank God for renewal of life in creation that we see rising again each year. Even in the back-and-forth time now between warmer and colder days, we feel the turn to new life again, and it refreshes us. And, even in the back-and-forth experience of this long year of the pandemic the world is struggling through, we now feel the turn toward hope and new strength, and even as we continue forward with some caution, we are refreshed with growing hope and relief.

Today, this last Sunday of Lent before we begin the great journey through Holy Week, we hear God's promise of a new covenant. Over these weeks of Lent, we have heard of God's covenants – God's promises and pledges in loving relationship with human beings – over the course of human history. A covenant with Noah and all of humanity following Noah. A covenant with Abraham and Sarah to bless the people of the earth through their many offspring. A covenant with the whole Hebrew people to be with them as they are given God's ways to live. There are also the promises to David of a kingdom that will not end.

All of these covenants, these promised relationships that God made with people, were hurt and broken by people throughout the record we read in scripture – and they have continued to be broken and twisted by people, and then rediscovered and re-embraced by people, through the ages.

Today, we hear of God promising a new covenant. This new covenant – this new promise – is to be spread far and wide, and is to be very direct with each person. This new covenant is to be written on people's hearts. God will connect directly with each and every person.

God is saying, "I shall be theirs, and they shall be mine. I will be for them, and they will be for me." This is God's language of deep, everlasting, unrelenting love. It's the kind of language we use at weddings when we pledge vows to each other in marriage. Because, that is the kind of bond that God desires with all of God's beloved creation, and certainly with God's beloved humanity.

So, this is the doorway opened for us by God. God, who continues to seek to break into human history and human lives, just persists in looking for ways to forge relationships with us.

You have heard me over my time with you talking about how our call for a while was for God to draw us closer, deeper, and wider, in our relationships with each other, with God and with ourselves, and with the world around us.

This new covenant is the promise of God seeking just that – to draw closer to us, deeper in relationship, and wider in reach of all people.

The prophets continually called the people of Israel and Judah to this ever closer, ever deepening, ever widening kind of relationship with God.

- ✦ I don't want your extra-special sacrifices and festivals – I want you to take care of the widow and orphan and to clean your hearts (Isa. 1, Ps. 82, James 1)
- ✦ My law shall be written on your hearts – you won't even need to remind each other to seek and know the Lord, because you will already know me, deep down in each of you – and you'll see that in each other (Ezek 11:13, Jer. 31:33, Heb. 8:10)
- ✦ It's too light a thing for you just to strengthen Judah and restore Israel – I am making you a light for the nations – I want salvation to reach the ends of the earth (see Isa. 49:6)

We find all of that here in Jeremiah this week, in this promise of a new covenant. What is closer than a God who speaks and writes directly in our own hearts and minds? What is deeper than the depths of our own hearts that we so often don't really know for ourselves? And what is more wide-spreading than a God who comes directly to people to be known, so that there is no gateway, but God is drawing all the world to himself?

So, some Greeks come to see Jesus. This is another time when Jesus is at the Temple. And, these Greeks – these foreigners, these outsiders who had sensed God calling them, in whom God had roused a desire to seek and find God among the Jewish people – these Greeks who had heard of Jesus came looking for him. And they come up to one of the disciples, Phillip, and say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Sir, we wish to see Jesus. Ma'am, we wish to see Jesus. Friend, help me see Jesus.

The hunger is there, folks.

Every day, just under the surface, for people everywhere, there is that yearning. People around us – and we ourselves – hear the call, "Know the Lord," and their hearts – and our hearts – respond, "Oh, we really want to." Under the frustrations and dulling repetitions of daily life, in the midst of family strife and uncertainties of work and school, at the heart of the hunger for meaning and purpose that weaves together the fabric of living, is that sweet yearning and inviting call from God, "Know me." It can sometimes take a lot to stir it to the surface enough for people – and for us – to say aloud. "I want to see Jesus."

So, does anyone else ever have the experience reading the Gospel of John that Jesus seems to be responding to a completely different conversation than the one he is actually having – that Jesus is answering a completely different question than he is being asked? It gets a little weird sometimes! It can seem like Jesus is speaking in non-sequiters – responses that don't really connect. Non-sequiters can seem so stranger, they are funny. Like these:

- My refrigerator is acting up. I'd better finish that book by Friday.
- It's time to take my car in for service. I wonder if my stylist is available this Saturday.

(examples from <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/non-sequitur-examples.html>)

This sounds like me talking to myself sometimes!

Maybe that's what we are getting a glimpse of with Jesus' response today. Jesus is saying out loud what is on his mind and heart.

And, as Jesus goes off into this "thinking out loud" kind of speech, we never get to see whether or not the Greeks actually ever get to meet him then!

Jesus in John's gospel is operating so often on a different plane than others around him – so much deeper, so much more wide-reaching, that we with our small, in-the-moment brains have trouble stretching to catch up. Jesus is looking ahead, down the road of toward the cross, to that whole culminating moment of his life ahead of him when he gives himself for the whole world, when he is lifted up, when he who is God-with-us is raised up high on display in shaming cruelty – when all the world will look and see.

Jesus' mind and heart are preoccupied. He is having an internal conversation: "My soul is troubled. What should I say... 'Father, save me'? No, this is the reason I am here, now. So, Father, show your glory in what is about to unfold."

We wish to see Jesus? Here is Jesus. Here is God-with-us, the Human One, wrestling with what is coming. Here is Jesus, troubled and distressed and grappling. Here is Jesus, who knows that the path ahead is full of sorrow and pain, and that this path is absolutely necessary to bring God's love to the world.

So, surrounding these words Jesus says that give us a glimpse of his own heart and mind, Jesus actually does respond to the wish of the Greeks to see him – and it is an answer for everyone, in all times and places. He says two things that respond to the foreigners' request:

1. "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." All people! Just like Deacon Glenda highlighted last week from John 3:17 – "For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world" – the whole world! – "through him might be saved." My Greek friends, you will see me. Come and see.

2. “Whoever serves me must follow me. And wherever I am, there will my servant be also.” If you want to be close to me, serve me and follow me. Follow me even on this path where we die like wheat falling to the ground and into the soil. Dying – giving up our protective outer shell, daring to allow ourselves to stretch out into unknown places uncovered and vulnerable, using what strength is left in us to press new deeper into whatever ground surrounds us. My Greek friends, if you wish to see me and be with me, follow me on this path.

And so it will be. So it is that God inscribes on our hearts – that call of God, “Give yourself away. Give yourself to me, and to the world around you. Hold nothing back. Follow me. I give myself away to you and the whole world.”

See, our Lord, our Brother, our Friend and Lover, Jesus turns his face to the cross. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” “Know the Lord.” Jesus says, “Follow me, and you will know, you will see, you will be embraced by these arms that stretch wide even in the midst of cruel rejection.” And you will know in your hearts that this – This! – is true.

Come. Follow Jesus. Even on the way of the cross. Let yourself die to self, give up that hard shell, let yourself be softened and opened to God inscribing on your heart. Give yourself away. It is then that you will see Jesus, who never ceases to give himself for the sake of the whole world.