

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Lenten Sermons for Sinners
Salvation

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
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³¹ “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.

³² 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.

³³ “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.

³⁴ 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.”

Do you know what the word “passion” means? Traditionally, this fifth Sunday in the season of Lent has been known as *Passion Sunday*. Often during Lent we’ll talk about the “Passion of our Lord.” In our mid-week devotions, we’ve been reading through what we call “the passion history.” So what does that mean? *Passio* is a Latin word that means “suffering.” Long before the word passion developed the meanings that it now holds in the English language it was being used to refer to the suffering of Jesus. Specifically, when we refer to “the passion” we’re talking about the suffering that Jesus endured on Good Friday. Right away, there’s an apparent contradiction in calling the day that Jesus was subjected to unjust torture, ridicule, and execution Good. How can a day full of suffering be good?

We heard Jesus talking about His passion in our Gospel lesson this morning or, at least, hinting at it. **The hour has come, He said, for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds** (John 12:23-24). If we aren’t paying attention, we might walk

away from that text thinking that Jesus was talking about being glorified, not suffering. But if we listen closely to that bit about the seed, we'll find that what Jesus wanted His disciples to understand was that in order for Him to be glorified, He must first suffer and die. Just like, in order for a seed of grain to "be glorified" or to achieve its purpose, it must first fall to the ground and die.

I have a friend named Hunter who works at a grocery store near here. I run into Hunter just about every week and I always know that the very first question he's going to ask me is, "What are you preaching on this week?" Most days I tell him, he nods, "Cool, cool," I finish cashing out my groceries, and I go on my way. But this week when I told him, "Jeremiah," he asked, "the beginning part?" I said, "No, closer to the middle, chapter 31," and then after a little pause, he said, "You know what's a really great story? The passion. It's great because it's so good but it's also so sad, isn't it?"

"You're right," I agreed, "and I think that's why I'm excited to preach on Jeremiah this week, because Jeremiah helps us to remember that, despite how sad it is to see Jesus suffering and dying, it is good. So good, in fact, that we still call that day Good Friday."

Jeremiah chapter 31 is one of the most promised-packed passages of the Bible. The section we're looking at today, verses 31-34, starts with God telling us that the time is coming when He will establish a new covenant with His people.

The Old Covenant which God had established with the nation of Israel wasn't a bad covenant. If you remember two weeks ago when we looked at the Ten Commandments which were a central part of that covenant, we saw that those commandments are good. They were meant to be a blessing to God's people. If they followed those commandments, the blessings which God promised them were abundant and clear. If, on the other hand, as sinful people are wont to do, they broke those commandments, then that Old Covenant would serve to point out their sins and just how badly they needed God's salvation.

It isn't that the Old Covenant didn't work, and so God had to come up with a new one. The truth is the Old Covenant served its purpose. It foreshadowed and so prepared God's people for the New Covenant so that when the time had fully come God could put things into motion to establish that New Covenant. The Old Covenant wasn't bad, but the New Covenant *is* better. Let's listen to what God has to tell us about it: **"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."**

I was reading a book about Jeremiah earlier this week and I highlighted a passage that really stood out to me, "Any plan for the betterment of human society that ignores the sin problem is destined to failure. It isn't enough to change the environment, for the heart of every problem is the problem of the heart. God must change the hearts of people so that they want to love Him and do His will. That's why He announced a New Covenant to replace the Old Covenant under which the Jews had lived since the days of Moses, a covenant that could direct their conduct but not change their character."

I don't know if you caught it, but there are some words in this section of Jeremiah's prophecy that I hope are starting to become very familiar to you: **I will be their God, and they will be my people.** That's the one, great, perfect, changeless, and eternal that everything we've looked at together these past two and a half years keeps coming back to. God wants you to be

His people. He wants to be your God. That's why He created the world, that's why He led your mother and father to meet and brought you into this world, and it's why He sent Jesus to suffer and die.

Wait a minute. Why does a great and perfect plan need to involve someone suffering and dying? I skipped a bit, didn't I? I skipped over the sin part—that problem of our hearts which is the heart of the problem. Our human tendency to not want to be a part of God's plan; to want our own plan. Like a little child whose parents want him to eat healthy food but who has a “better plan” and ruins his appetite on sweets before dinner time even comes, we look at the “sweets” the world has to offer and decide that they're better than what God to offer.

That plan—**I will be their God, and they will be my people**—that's essentially what's under the microscope when we hear the phrase in Scripture, “the image of God.” Adam and Eve were created in God's image. His plan was their plan. His will was their will. He wanted to be their God and they wanted to be His people. When they adopted a new plan—when they saw the fruit that God had told them not to eat, listened to the devil telling them just how sweet it was, and determined “this plan is better than God's plan,” they fell out of sync with God. They fell into sin. They lost the image.

The heart of the problem now was the problem with their hearts and that was what God needed to fix. But first, He had to deal with the sin problem. He told them immediately how their salvation from sin would come: the offspring that will crush the devil's head. The offspring that would usher in the New Covenant, who would demonstrate love so great that through it God could set His Spirit to work restoring the hearts of men to that image they had lost, the will to be God's people and for Him to be their God.

Here we are, members of God's New Covenant, recipients of the amazing promises that covenant offers, but caught in the tension between the already, and the not yet. Next Thursday, in an evening service of Word and Sacrament, we'll mark the night when Jesus said to His disciples, **This cup is the New Covenant in My blood which is poured out for you** (Luke 22:20). Then that Friday night, we'll celebrate that Good day when, through His suffering, Jesus brought glory to God by bringing us salvation from the problem of our sins. A short while later we'll gather again on Easter Sunday morning to let our Alleluias ring out in joy at the news that God has forgiven our sins and will remember our sins no more.

We are already, members of that New Covenant, a fact we rejoice in regularly as we celebrate the Lord's Supper and receive that “blood of the new covenant” which He poured out for us for the forgiveness of our sins. The Holy Spirit is already at work within us sanctifying us and restoring our hearts through the power of the gospel to the image of God. We are being transformed, the apostles tell us, into that same image—renewed to true knowledge in the image of our Creator (2 Corinthians 3:18, Colossians 3:9).

Being restored, being transformed, being renewed. That's where we are, in the midst of what God has already done for us, but still looking forward to that which He has in store for us when that restoration and transformation is complete and that plan, that one great perfect plan is finally realized. The Apostle John records a vision of that day which he received in His revelation: **Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had passed away.... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more**

death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”

(Revelation 21:1-4).

Through Jeremiah His prophet He adds, **My law will be in their minds, written on their hearts. 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. I will be there God and they will be My people, For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.**

In the next two weeks we’ll be revisiting what may seem to be the saddest and most dreadful point in history as we look at the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is sad; but it is also Good because it yields the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of greater glory still to come.

Amen.