

Manningham Uniting Church Sunday, 17th March 2024

Fifth Sunday of Lent Fellowship@10

Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34 & John 12:20-33

Theme: As if...

Introduction

Today is the fifth Sunday of Lent.

When was the last time you made a promise? *"I promise I'll have that work done by tomorrow."* *"I promise I'll clean my room."* *"I promise I'll love you forever."* When was the last time you broke a promise?

One of my pet annoyances is when a character on TV or in a movie says, *"I promise you I will catch the guy who did this"* or *"I promise you are not going to die."*

I want to scream, *"Don't make promises you don't know you'll be able to keep."*

Because even though we don't set out to break a promise, unfortunately, it does happen. And it causes disappointment, pain, heartache, and sometimes even rage.

There are consequences.

Now let's get a little more legalistic. When was the last time you entered a contract? That's a kind of promise, too, right? Two parties make a binding agreement, such as an employer promises to pay a certain amount to the employee for specified work. Or a church signs a contract for the installation of new carpet. There are consequences there too if one side or the other doesn't fulfill their part of the deal.

Now let me ask a different way – when was the last time you made or broke a covenant? 'Covenant' isn't a word we use very often in everyday conversation. I know it's a legal term used in finance and real estate. The United Nations has an International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Maybe where we're used to hearing it most is about marriage.

A covenant is a pledge, a formal and serious promise or agreement.

But it's not a word we hear or use a lot – except in the Bible, where there are covenants all over the place.

So, to review. First, there was the covenant with Noah, with the rainbow as the sign of the promise made to all of creation to never again flood the whole earth. The second covenant was with Abraham and Sarah, with the beautiful, poetic promise that their offspring would be as innumerable as the stars in the sky and grains of sand on the seashore. Then came the covenant given to Moses on Mount Sinai. This contract, often known as "the Law" and

included the Ten Commandments, was more fully developed than ever before as the way to live both in a covenantal relationship with God (I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me. Don't take the name of God in vain. Honour your father and your mother) and with our neighbours. You shall not kill, etc., etc). This was the way to live in the right relationship, in a covenant relationship with God and with one another.

So how are we doing with these promises?

If we go by Martin Luther's explanations of the 10 Commandments, we have to admit that we fall far short of keeping up our end of the deal. For example, for the 5th Commandment Luther says that not only should we not kill our neighbours, but we should also help them with all their physical needs.

And concerning the 8th Commandment, not only should we not bear false witness or lie about our neighbours, we should defend them, speak well of them, and always put the best construction on what they say and do. And on those two alone, we have a lot of work to do.

If we're honest – and Lent is the season of honesty – we'll admit that we continually play a part in breaking the covenant with God. We do it in our personal lives in the choices and mistakes we make as individuals – those things for which we offer our confession and our intention to repent and do better.

We also have to admit that we participate corporately in breaking the covenant with God. This is what Jeremiah was talking about in his day. He was writing his prophetic proclamations amid colossal failure in ancient Israel. The city of Jerusalem had been conquered and burned, the temple destroyed, the monarchy terminated, the leading citizens deported into exile. This all came about, said Jeremiah, because Israel had broken the covenant, disobeyed the commandments of Sinai, did not take justice seriously, and did not ground its life in the God of the Exodus. And so, he said, came the judgment of God. Now we would not say that it's God sending punishment.

We need to remember a covenant is not a quid pro quo deal: you scratch God's back and God scratches yours. No, it's about living in harmony in the body of God. But there are consequences when we don't.

Old Testament scholar, author and prophet Walter Brueggemann brought the brokenness of ancient Israel into our present day: *"We see that in our society the fabric of the humancommunity is almost totally broken... That tension is rooted in very old racism... This*

is one frontal manifestation of 'the covenant' that they broke, as referred to in the Jeremiah text: a refusal of neighbourly solidarity that leads, with seeming certitude, to disastrous social consequences. We have, like ancient Israel, been on a binge of narcissistic self-indulgence." The human community is almost totally broken. Do you agree with him?

Quoting Brueggemann again: ". . . we know that a sustainable social life requires attentiveness to a neighbour. Torah obedience is not a narrow moralism. It is rather realism and readiness about what is required for society to work in life-flourishing ways."

This is exactly what Jeremiah is addressing in his stunning oracle that we read today. The admission of the brokenness of his society allows him to anticipate a "new covenant," a new beginning, a new possibility. He imagines a time when all of us will naturally "know" God. We'll instinctively know how to be a good neighbour to all people. Our relationship with God will automatically define attitudes, actions, and policies.

That sounds really good, doesn't it?

This text is so beautifully hopeful; we love to read it and believe that we are recipients of such a covenant. Make no mistake, though, and think that Jeremiah is talking about a covenant that will replace or surpass the previous ones. All the covenants we've read throughout Lent are still in place.

Jeremiah isn't speaking of a new law, but rather of an upcoming era in which God enables human beings to follow the existing law by way of a transformation of the heart: *"I will put my Law in their minds and on their hearts."* This is a Jewish idea picked up by Jesus and the early Jewish-Christian communities that followed him. It is an extension of the longing for intimacy and Divine guidance already present in earlier covenants. We can relate to that longing today.

Like our Jewish siblings, we yearn for an inner transformation for a new way of being. Of course, even though the prophet says the day is "surely coming," we're quite aware that, to put it mildly, it's not yet here. As a people, we are broken in so many ways.

I don't think I'm alone in this condition. We have much truth-telling and repenting (turning around) to do in Lent. We know that the pandemic has exacerbated societal inequities that have been festering for a long time. Domestic violence is still a problem for us. The First Peoples are overrepresented in our prisons. White supremacy is on the rise. The issues show us how poorly we see the interconnections of race, gender, class, sexual identity,

orientation and expression, and other communities that are often oppressed or marginalized.

This morning, I want to reflect on the concept of *intersectionality*. These days, it is very easy to become embroiled in a battle over who is more oppressed, like there's a hierarchy of oppression.

Several years ago, when I was having a conversation about Racism on Facebook, a Facebook friend wrote: "We can't talk about racism until we have dealt with sexism." I was flabbergasted by her post. I replied, "I didn't know there was a hierarchy of isms."

When we recognize that oppressed groups are not in competition but are all part of an overarching system of domination, we are in a better place to stand with and support one another, not just in our own silo, but across the board. And it's not an either/or matter. We need to remember that *the experiences of individuals and groups are shaped and complicated by intersecting factors. These include race, ethnicity, national origin, nationality, religious identity, immigration status, sexuality, marital status, economic means, age, ability, embodied experiences, and education.*

Unfortunately, many people on the conservative side of the divide have come to understand intersectionality as a new hierarchy of oppression, one in which minorities are now at the top and white people at the bottom. They are propagating the idea that these days white people are being oppressed. This could not be more false, at least from everything I've read and from the standpoint of living out our faith.

It is all about bringing the un-hierarchical nature of the kin-dom of God a little closer to fruition. It is recognizing the brokenness of our society and bringing covenant living to bear in whatever way we can. When we live mindfully of our covenant with God, we know we're not yet living in the fullness of the Divine will for us.

But this magnificent oracle from Jeremiah is a vision of what can be, what God desires it to be. It's the vision that was written on Jesus' heart. Coming, as he did, out of the history and tradition of the covenant of his study of the Hebrew scriptures, he longed to bring that vision to fruition in our own hearts.

But as we well know, that beautiful vision, that Divine-infused heart would not prevent him from being killed by those who had a vested interest in frustrating the fulfilment of that vision.

There's no way to sugarcoat the reality of Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of the Roman empire. There's no way to sugarcoat the reality of the ongoing crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of empire today. This far into Lent, it is hard to see the Easter light at the end of the journey. And yet, Lent is preparation for Easter. It's planting the seeds of radical, inexplicable new beginnings.

In this oracle, the admission of his people's brokenness permits Jeremiah to anticipate a "new covenant." It allows Jesus to go to death in the expectation that the vision can still be true. It hopefully enables us to live, as Martin Luther called it, in the "now and the not yet" realm of God, in which we can operate "as if" the new covenant is already in place, "as if" it's written on our hearts and embedded in our minds.

It enables us to take seriously the promises of our baptisms, to serve all people following the example of Jesus; and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

If Good Friday is to have any meaning, there has to be the promise that God can take what is broken and make it whole – that applies to us, it applies to our world.

But a covenant is never just one-sided. The question is: *Are we willing to seriously live in a covenant relationship with God, with God's people and all of creation?* Because it means commitment, accountability, reconciliation, loving our neighbour and enemy, forgiveness, and hospitality. It means acting, operating out of the covenant in our hearts – not because it's been programmed in us against our will, but because we have chosen to live in a relationship with the Divine Presence, which can make broken things new.

Why would we not want to abide in the heart of God? Imagine how our world would be different if we really did take seriously Martin Luther's explanation of the 8th Commandment: to defend our neighbours (which means everybody), speak well of them, and always put the best construction on what they say and do.

I'll be honest, I need help. I need a new heart, a renewed heart, an infusion of Divine Presence within me to be able to do the work that is required of us in these trying times.

And I believe we are coming into a time of new imagination, new creativity. New pathways are being opened through the wilderness and our broken hearts are being infused with Divine Love – much too much to be kept inside and in need of spilling out into the world.

Next week is Palm Sunday, then it's Holy Week. The cross looms large.

Jesus tells us that unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest. Yes, he's talking about his own death and resurrection. But he's talking about us, too. "If you love your life, you will lose it; if you hate your life in this world you will keep it for eternal life." Or as Matthew and Mark have it: "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

To die to our self-centred ego-driven ways and live into the heart of the covenant into which we've been baptized, is to find those places where we can take an active part in the commitment, accountability, neighbourliness, community, hospitality, and compassion of the kin-dom of God.

The way is already written on our hearts – not because it's been programmed in us against our will, but because it speaks to our deepest longings.

Some days, many days lately, the brokenness of our world seems intractable. As I'm sure it did in Jeremiah's day. Yet he tells us to look up, to look ahead. Because God loves making and keeping covenants.

As I'm sure it did in Jesus' day, too, especially when the powers of the Roman empire and the religious establishment conspired to quench the flame of love in that Divine heart. Except they couldn't do it.

Jesus also tells us to look up, the cross looms ahead. Jesus also tells us to look ahead, not in denial of the pain and suffering of the world, but in trust that to follow in the way of Jesus is to enter eternal life – now.

That's the promise.

Cross my heart.

And all God's people say... Amen.