

## THE HEART COVENANT

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, March 22, 2015*

*Fifth Sunday in Lent*

*First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT*

*“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”*

### **Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34**

<sup>31</sup>The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It 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. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my teaching within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

<sup>34</sup>No 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.

I begin this morning with a well-known quotation from Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*. These words are taken from Macbeth's soliloquy in Act V, Scene 5:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.<sup>1</sup>

These two readings—one from the biblical prophet Jeremiah, the other from the Elizabethan poet and playwright William Shakespeare—stand in sharp contrast to one another. Each reading is a response to a terrible sorrowful event. In the case of Jeremiah, the terrible sorrowful event is the conquest of Israel by the Babylonian empire and the deportation of the leading citizens of Jerusalem into exile in Babylon. In the case of Macbeth, the terrible sorrowful event is the news of the death of his wife.

Macbeth's response to this terrible event in his life is one of deep despair. There's probably not a person in this room who hasn't at some point in their life resonated with Macbeth's soliloquy. Not only is it fully human to feel despondent in the face of a great loss. Shakespeare's language and imagery give particularly strong voice to this universal human experience and emotion.

Jeremiah's response to the terrible event in his life and the life of his people was multi-faceted. On the one hand, Jeremiah, like all the biblical prophets, was deeply disturbed by what he saw as his people's betrayal of their covenant with God. On the other hand, Jeremiah believed deeply in God's faithfulness to the covenant, a faithfulness to which the people could turn during their time in exile.

Where God's vision for the chosen people was one of egalitarian community, the reality of Israel's life at the time of Jeremiah was far removed from this vision. Economic injustice was widespread, as it was centuries later in the time of Jesus, as it is millennia later in Israel and the United States. In the chapters that precede today's reading, Jeremiah has been railing against the corruption of political authorities and the hypocrisy of religious authorities.<sup>2</sup>

Jeremiah, like his spiritual ancestors and descendants in the prophetic tradition, believed that God was not pleased with Israel's betrayal of the Sinai covenant, a betrayal which was evidenced in the extreme “wealth gap” of the sixth century before the common era. Jeremiah also believed that when disaster

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 5.

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.5.5.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Erickson, “Commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34,”

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1432](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1432).

struck Israel—such as its defeat by the Babylonian military and the subsequent half-century of exile in Babylon—such disaster was a clear sign of God's judgment on the nation. At the same time, Jeremiah was confident that God's judgment was not forever, and that a time would come when the people would be restored to right relationship with God.

In the meantime, of course, the people would have to come to terms with the consequences of their covenantal betrayal and their life in exile—which was not a happy time. After the exile had finally come to an end, the writer of Psalm 137 remembered what that time had been like:

<sup>1</sup>By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

<sup>2</sup>On the willows there we hung up our harps.

<sup>3</sup>For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

<sup>4</sup>How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

Jeremiah sent the exiles a letter with some astonishing advice for a people facing a time of such bitterness and despair. Here is the text of that letter, preserved in chapter 29 of Jeremiah:

<sup>4</sup>Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>But seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*.”

It is against this backdrop of covenant betrayal, divine judgment, and exile that we need to read and hear today's text from Jeremiah, the promise of a new covenant. The covenant that the people had betrayed was the Sinai covenant, which, in the words of biblical scholar Amy Erickson, “was wrought in the wilderness between the slaves newly liberated from Egypt and the god of their ancestors.”

The Sinai covenant marked these newly liberated slaves as “a people...set apart for holiness to God, for God intends for them to be an instrument of blessing to the whole earth.”<sup>3</sup>

The foundation of the Sinai covenant, the Ten Commandments, was written on two stone tablets—actually on two different sets of stone tablets. When Moses came down the mountain with the first set, and saw his brother Aaron and the people dancing around the golden calf they had fashioned, “Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain” (Exodus 32:19). So Moses had to go up the mountain a second time to get a replacement set of stone tablets from God (Exodus 34:1-4).

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<sup>3</sup> Erickson, *ibid*.

Stone tablets can be physically broken, as Moses showed when his “anger burned hot.” And the covenant itself can be spiritually broken when the people fail to cultivate “a culture of justice and *shalom* for all.”<sup>4</sup> This was the situation in which the political and religious leaders of Jeremiah’s time found themselves: living with the consequences of a broken covenant. And the most severe of those consequences was a people’s broken heart: By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept.

Jeremiah’s profound advice to the broken-hearted exiles was to seek the *shalom*, the well-being, of the city of the enemy, and to pray to God on its behalf, for in its *shalom*, the people will find their own *shalom*, their own well-being. And along with this profound advice, Jeremiah offered the exiles God’s promise of a new covenant—a covenant that would be written on the heart of the people as a whole, as well as on the heart of each individual person. This would be God’s way of healing the broken hearts of grief-stricken exiles: to write on those broken hearts.

One author I read compares “written on the heart” to a tattoo as a “mark of identity.” Baptist pastor Stacey Elizabeth Simpson writes:

“Pain, indelibility, identity. These are the central aspects of what it means to be marked. If it didn’t involve pain, it wouldn’t be indelible: marks that don’t hurt are the ones that wash off. If it were not indelible, what it revealed about a person’s identity wouldn’t be so critical. Tattoo your arm with ‘Roseanne’ in your 20s, and you better still be married to her 30 years later.

“Pain, indelibility and identity are also the hallmarks of God writing the covenant on the heart of the people....

“This is as permanent as any [tattoo]. Whereas laws written in stone can be broken and put aside, God’s covenant in hearts is more enduring. God’s hold on us cannot be erased without cutting out a part of ourselves.

“The covenant [marks] us as ‘God’s people.’ It is an internal identity that will be evidenced by external behavior....The capacity to be [‘an instrument of blessing for the whole earth’] will spring from the inside.”<sup>5</sup>

Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who is the founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries, which for 25 years has been a remarkably successful gang intervention program located in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, the gang capital of the world. Gregory Boyle has written a book about this ministry with the title *Tattoos on the Heart – The Power of Boundless Compassion*.

In the preface to the book, Gregory Boyle—who is known to the “homies” he works with as “G” or “G-dog”—tells the story of how he decided on the title for his book.

“Once, after dealing with a particularly exasperating homie named Sharkey, I switch my strategy and decide to catch him in the act of doing the right

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<sup>4</sup> Erickson, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Stacey Elizabeth Simpson, “Branded by God: Jeremiah 31:31-34,” <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2032>.

thing. I can see I have been too harsh and exacting with him, and he is, after all, trying the best he can.

“I tell him how heroic he is and how the courage he now exhibits in transforming his life far surpasses the hollow 'bravery' of his barrio past. I tell him that he is a giant among men. I mean it. Sharkey seems to be thrown off balance by all this and silently stares at me. Then he says, 'Damn, G...I'm gonna tattoo that on my heart.'”<sup>6</sup>

Like a tattoo on the heart, a covenant written on the heart is invisible and indelible. A covenant written on the heart is also a source of identity, forged in the midst of doubt and despair by a God who is merciful and gracious. Such a covenant is a powerful antidote to Macbeth's belief that

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more.

Life together in covenant with God is grounded in the knowledge that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving our iniquity and remembering our sin no more. It is a tattoo engraved on the heart, an invisible unbreakable mark of identity, a source of blessing for us and for those around us. It is a reminder that God is with us and that we are God's people: for God sets us free from sin and sorrow to bring life and truth and goodness and beauty to this most amazing life that God has given us. Thanks

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart – The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), xiv.