

WRITTEN ON THE HEART

Script for Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, October 16, 2016

Higganum Congregational Church – 9:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church of Haddam – 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Reading – Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)

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. 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. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be

my people. 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.

Scripture Reading – Second Corinthians 3:2-6 (NRSV)

You yourselves are our letter [of recommendation], written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

I think it's fair to say that the center of gravity of Jewish religion is the Sinai Covenant, given by God through Moses during the Exodus narrative. And the center of gravity of the Sinai Covenant is the two stone tablets on which God inscribed the Ten Commandments.

There were actually two sets of two stone tablets. Moses had smashed to pieces the first set of tablets when he brought them down from the summit of Mount Sinai and saw the Israelites dancing around the golden calf. So Moses had to ascend to Sinai's summit a second time, this time bringing with him blank stone tablets on which God would again write the Ten Commandments.

Given a second opportunity to commit themselves to the covenant which God was offering them, the people affirmed their loyalty to this covenant. Moses then engaged the services of a master craftsman to build the Ark of the Covenant, a box made of acacia wood and plated with fine gold, inside and out. It is believed that the Ark contained both the broken pieces of the first set of stone tablets, as well as the second set of unbroken tablets.

The Ark accompanied the Israelites during their 40-year wilderness journey; it was used in worship until the destruction of the [First Temple](#) by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE. The Ark of the Covenant was the most important [symbol](#) of the Jewish faith, and served as the only physical manifestation of [God](#) on earth. Once the Babylonians removed the Ark from the Temple, with its contents of the tablets of the Ten Commandments, there was no longer any "physical manifestation" of God's covenant with Israel.

The prophet Jeremiah lived during the times preceding and following the destruction of the Temple and the beginnings of the Babylon Exile. Jeremiah was among those who were allowed to remain in Jerusalem. It was from Jerusalem that Jeremiah wrote several letters to the exiles in Babylon.

Last Sunday, we heard an excerpt from one of those letters, in which Jeremiah urged the exiles to settle in for the long haul, and also to pray and work for the well-being, the *shalom*, of the city of their enemies and oppressors. Today, we heard an excerpt from the Book of Consolation, which centers on God's promises of the return from exile and the restoration of Jerusalem. These verses could well have been shared not only with the exiles, but also with those who, like Jeremiah, had been left behind in the ruined city.

It's especially noteworthy that nothing is said here about the rebuilding of the Temple. Rather, God promises to restore the land, so it produces abundantly, and to redeem the people, so they can dance joyfully (31:12-13):

"They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow."

Nor is there any reference to the return of the Ark of the Covenant. Instead, Jeremiah embraces God's promise that God will enter into a new covenant with Israel, a covenant that will be written on the people's heart and not on tablets of stone. With this new covenant, the **people of Israel** will become the "physical manifestation of God on earth." The **people** will become the Ark of the Covenant.

A key component of this new covenant is the promise of "forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace." As God promised to the people through Jeremiah: "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more." As Jesus said when he offered the cup to his disciples at the last supper: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me."

This new covenant will "[mark] us as 'God's people.' It [will become] an internal identity that will be evidenced by external behavior. We will live God's law not because we are obliged to but because we want to, because our hearts are shaped that way. The capacity to be faithful and obedient will spring from the inside."¹ The new covenant will be confirmed through the promise of forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace.

Father Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who is the founder and director of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. Homeboy Industries is one of the most successful anti-gang programs in the United States, if not in the world. Former gang members who come into the program—homies, as they are called—have their own ways of addressing Father Boyle. They call him Father G, or G-dog, or simply G.

Gregory Boyle tells the story of working with an especially exasperating young man known as Sharkey. "One day Boyle decided to switch his strategy and try to catch Sharkey in the act of doing something right:

"I tell him how heroic he is and how the courage he now exhibits in transforming his life far surpasses all 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.'"²

You don't have to like tattoos in order to appreciate the force of Sharkey's simple words. In fact, I can hear in Sharkey's words the same kind of thing I hear in Jeremiah's words. God doesn't write God's new covenant on our hearts in pencil that can easily be erased. God writes with indelible ink. God's new covenant with us is tattooed on our hearts. God's new covenant with us is permanent and forever.

¹Stacey Elizabeth Simpson, "Branded by God," *The Christian Century*, 117 no 28 Oct 18 2000, p 1035.

²Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, xiv. Cited in Mary Moschella, *Caring for Joy: Narrative, Theology, and Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 104.