

A New Covenant
Jeremiah 31:31-34. John 12:20-33

Last week we saw one of the many ups and downs in the relationship between God and the Hebrew people. Having forgotten all that God had done for them, the people complained against God about the hardships of their wilderness journey. That's when God sent fiery serpents among them, causing many of them to die. Yet God's love and concern for them never wavered. By having Moses lift a bronze serpent on a pole, God provided them a concrete symbol of his love. When those who had been bitten looked up, lifting their eyes and repentant hearts toward heaven, they were made well.

But, of course, this turning back to God was not permanent. God, of course, was always faithful in keeping his part of the covenant, but the children of Israel, his bride, were often unfaithful. For generations, the relationship was a roller coaster ride; the people turning away from God, then God finding a way to bring them back. Eventually, as part of Israel's responsibility under the covenant, God established a system of ritualistic sacrifices that were to be offered.

On the Day of Atonement, which came once a year, the High Priest entered the sanctuary of the temple. There before the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant, he prepared three animals – a bull, a goat, and a second goat. The bull was killed first and sacrificed for the sins of the high priest. Once this was done and the high priest was considered ritually clean, he then entered the Holy of Holies – the most inner part of the temple, taking the two goats with him.

As the first goat was sacrificed, its blood was strewn over the altar as a symbol that this blood was offered before God as an atonement for the sins of all the people. The priest would then take his soiled hands – covered with the blood of the first animal – and place them on the head of the second goat, soiling its head and figuratively placing on it the sins of the children of Israel. This animal was not killed, but set free. It was released to run through the crowds and off into the wilderness. As it left, the high priest proclaimed to the people, *You sins have gone away just as the goat has gone away.* The departure of the goat was a concrete symbol that their sins had left them.

We might think the second goat was unnecessary since the first had already been sacrificed for their sins. But the second goat provided a visual experience. The people were able to watch their sins go away. The second goat was called the scapegoat.

At the time of Jeremiah's prophecy, however, the system had become corrupt. The priests had become greedy, seeking more and more from the people – not only in sacrifices, but in financial offerings as well. And the people continued to be corrupt, too. They worshipped false gods and made insincere sacrifices in the temple to the true God. Their covenant with God carried no meaning.

Through the prophet, Jeremiah, God said, *The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant which I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt –*

a covenant which they broke. I will put the law within them and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they shall be my people, from the least of them to the greatest.

Walt Wangerin is a wonderful writer and storyteller. I had the opportunity to hear him in person at one of the past youth gatherings. He tells the story of one of his experiences as a parent. Walt and his wife were going through a difficult time with their son, Matthew, who was on the threshold of adolescence. He seemed to be rebelling against every value the family held dear. On more than one occasion, the boy had been caught stealing comic books from a local store.

After the latest incident, Walt was in despair. Feeling he'd run out of every other alternative, he resorted to a technique he'd not use for years and gave his son a spanking. The father performed the act gravely and deliberately. When it was finished, he was so upset that he ran from the room and wept. After pulling himself back together, he went back in to his son, Matthew, and hugged him, long and hard. Nothing more was said, by father or son, about the incident, but Matthew never stole another comic book.

Years later, Matthew the grown man and his mother were doing some reminiscing and the subject came around to the comic book incident. *Do you know why I finally stopped,* he asked his mother. *Of course,* she said, *It's because Dad finally spanked you.*

No, replied Matthew, *it wasn't the spanking at all. It was because Dad cried.* That had touched him in a way the spanking never could.

This is something like what Jeremiah means when he predicts the law will be written on our hearts. No longer will it be the threat of punishment that makes the difference in how we live. Rather, it will be because *we will know the Lord – from the least to the greatest.*

God declared that he would write a new covenant, not one that depended on outward expressions or good works, but a covenant that would come through faith – from the inner self or the heart. This new covenant would also involve a sacrifice and a high priest. That High Priest would be Christ who, unlike the other high priests, would be perfect and without sin. And according to our second reading, the writer of Hebrews tells us that this was not Christ's choosing. He was appointed by the one who said, *You are my Son, today I have begotten you.*

Then in the gospel reading, we find this High Priest, Jesus, in the last week of his life on earth. He has just brought Lazarus back to back to life – which has upset the religious leaders and prompted them to look for a way to get rid of him. He has made the triumphal entry into Jerusalem which has infuriated them even more.

Jesus knows the time for his crucifixion is near. And when Philip and Andrew bring some Greeks to see Jesus, he uses that moment as an opportunity to let these Greeks, the disciples, and all those in his hearing know what lies ahead for him and for all who follow him. *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.* When Jesus says this, his audience immediately has images of an earthly king or military leader who is going to oust the Romans and restore the land to the Jews.

But that's not what Jesus means when he says he will be glorified. And he uses an analogy to explain. *A grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die if it is to bear good fruit.* He's telling them that he must die and be buried – like a seed. And from that seed – his own body buried in a tomb – will come new life for him and the promise of new life for all who believe.

He also indicates that those who follow him must also die. Only by dying to sin can we produce good fruit. This death occurs for us at baptism where our old, sinful selves are put to death and where we receive the promise of salvation. At that time, a seed is planted in each of us by the Holy Spirit, the new covenant written on our hearts, so that we may serve our Lord in faith.

As the reading continues, Jesus talks about his troubled soul. The other three gospels show Jesus struggling with his imminent death in the Garden of Gethsemane. But in John, it is here that Jesus is most tempted by his humanity. He feels the weight of the cross looming near. *What should I say? Father, save me from this hour?* But he answers his own question: *No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.*

Jesus submitted to his Father's will. We was willing to be the sacrifice, something none of the other high priests could have done. You see, he was not only the priest offering the sacrifice, he was the sacrifice itself. He would symbolically be both goats. Jesus would die – not in a closed space like the Holy of Holies – but out in the open where everyone could see. Just like the scapegoat, he would be a visual symbol that our sins are taken away from us.

Furthermore, he says, *When I am lifted up from the earth* – meaning lifted up on the cross – *I will draw all people to myself.* Remember now, some Greeks are part of his audience. Jesus makes it clear that his ministry and death are not for the Jews only, but for *all* people. Through him, God has entered a new covenant whereby *all shall know me...from the least to the greatest.* That's what Jeremiah prophesied. And we see that prophesy being fulfilled through Christ. He, himself, acknowledges it: *When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.*

My friends, God has entered into a new covenant with us. No longer must we be strict adherents of the law, no longer must we offer sacrifices for the atonement of our sins, no longer must we do good works in order to find favor with God. The ultimate sacrifice has been offered. The price for our sins has been paid. We must simply believe that God's promises are true.

It seems too simple, I know. But that's how God works. He tells us that we must have faith to be saved, then he, himself, plants the seed of faith within us. He writes the new covenant on our hearts. What an awesome God we have. Amen.