

Sermon: Written on the Heart

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Jeremiah 31:31-34**; **John 12:20-33**

Many things mark New North Church as an outlier among Christian churches. We're non-denominational, which is not so rare as it might seem these days, but still different. How we're organized and self-supported, with a meetinghouse corporation on one side and a church on the other, *is* becoming rare. Our discussions following the sermon are very nearly unique. And the fact that we all seem to like it this way says a lot about us as a congregation.

That said, we might consider making the prophet Jeremiah our patron saint, even if he's a somewhat dangerous one.

He's dangerous because he's got prophetic vision while the rest of us are wearing bifocals. He challenged the conventional wisdom that Bible interpretation is just too difficult for the great unwashed.

The days that are surely coming, says the Lord, are the days when the exiles finally return from Babylon. They've been gone about fifty years, and, in that time, everything has changed. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed in two separate rebellions, the second of which resulted in sending most of the priests, elders, and royal society off to Babylon, and organized religion in Jerusalem went with them.

Jeremiah stayed in Jerusalem to help the people there rebuild their lives. They had to figure out a new way to worship God. In Jeremiah's eyes, temple worship and God's covenant with King David were part of the problem, a false religion destined to fail. With the impending return of those exiled to Babylon, he began preaching oracles of hope to the people in Jerusalem, and he told them of his new vision.

Second Samuel, chapter 7, describes God's unconditional covenant made with David, which promises that the Messiah would come from the lineage of David and the tribe of Judah. Everything rests solely on God's faithfulness and does not depend at all on David or Israel's obedience.

The Davidic Covenant centers on several key promises made to David. First, God reaffirms the promise of the land made in the covenants with Abraham and Moses (2 Samuel 7:10). Then God promises that David's son Solomon will succeed him as king of Israel and that he would be the one to build the Temple (2 Samuel 7:12–13).

But then God says, “I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (verse 13), and “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (verse 16). What began as a simple covenant turns into something different—the promise of an everlasting kingdom. A future Son of David would rule forever and build a lasting House. Christians see this as a reference to the Messiah, Jesus Christ, called the Son of David in Matthew 21:9.¹

Jeremiah knows nothing about Jesus. What he sees is injustice and unrighteousness in the House of David of his time, and how it and the Temple religion had brought ruin to Israel. He would replace the Davidic Covenant with a new covenant, one in which God will put the law within the people, written on their hearts. Everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know the Lord without having been taught by another person. And, says God, and this is the part that Christians have taken to heart, ‘I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.’

But there's a problem here.

Jeremiah's talking about a new covenant which some NT writers use as a ‘get out of jail free’ card, particularly the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. This letter, which reads more like a sermon, dates to the late first-century, and it argues that because of Jeremiah's new covenant, Christians, through Christ, have direct access to God without the need to make a sacrifice of blood or grain. No teachers, no preachers, no pulpit.²

But replacing the Davidic Covenant would negate Matthew's claim that Jesus, as a Son of David, was the Messiah. Had the Davidic Covenant been broken or revoked, we wouldn't be shouting ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ on the front steps next week. So, Christians can't embrace both Jeremiah's new covenant and the Davidic Covenant at the same time. The bottom line is, we can only read Hebrew Scripture, commonly called the Old Testament, on its own terms and understand it in its own context before we can talk about what it means for us.

So, what happened to Jeremiah's new covenant? Essentially it got shouted down by Nehemiah and the returning exiles, who made it clear that only the scribe and the Levite priest would read and interpret Torah. Below the surface, there were also questions about power and privilege, and if everyone could know God on equal terms, how would 'the greatest' keep 'the least of them' in their place?

Even the apostle Paul was confident that the congregation was able to instruct itself through critical discussion of Scripture (Romans 15:14). As it grew, though, the later church built up hierarchies of power to limit unsupervised access to God. For centuries, the Catholic Church made it illegal to translate the Bible into common languages, and the various popes actively persecuted anyone who dared to try.

Which brings us back to Jesus, who started all of this.

The reading from John takes place following Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The crowd that had been with him when he raised Lazarus from the tomb was still hanging around, telling everyone about Jesus. The Pharisees were agitated because there was nothing they could do to stop all of this. 'Look,' they said, 'the whole world has gone after him!' It was at that point that the Greeks arrived, asking to see Jesus.

And then the Greeks disappear from the story, having served their purpose.

Their purpose, apparently, was to represent the world and to raise the question, 'which Jesus do you want to see?' Jesus' ministry is all but over at this point, and now he's talking about how a grain of wheat needed to die before it could bear fruit, how if you love your life you will lose it, and how those who serve him will, through their service, honor God. Then he said that when he is lifted up from the earth, meaning his crucifixion, he will draw all people to himself, people like those Greeks.

In verse 34, the crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?'

It's a good question. The Jesus the Greeks and the world are looking for is not necessarily the Jesus they're going to get. We will only really see Jesus after the dying and the resurrection, when Eternity intrudes on Now.

It may be that we're not supposed to know fully who Jesus is, just as we can never know God fully. Neither should we get too comfortable knowing only one aspect of

Jesus. If we can only see the Jesus who could turn water into wine, but not the Jesus who could clear out exploitation and injustice from the Temple, we have work to do.

But we should know that the Jesus on the cross exposes the system for what it is, an opponent of God's purposes, a way of death, not life. And once we see the system for what it is, we can begin our journey back from Babylon, set free from captivity in order to live freely and fully in the way of Jesus.

In our time, we have seen how the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's civil rights campaign exposed the system of white racism to the world, and how it brought so many issues to the surface, things that were always there but which we just didn't see. It turned out to be his life's work, unfinished but still in progress. King has been gone for fifty years now, and everything has changed, thanks in part to him.

The paradox of faith is that once you realize, once you accept, how hard it is to keep the commandments, to *do* justice, to love your neighbor, and to walk humbly with your God, then it gets easier to do those things, because it's always in the forefront of your thinking.

In that sense, God has indeed put the law in us; it is written on our hearts. Jeremiah put his vision out there. Whether or not Nehemiah could ever accept it doesn't matter. God's new covenant is still in force, even as all of God's other covenants remain in force, everlasting, through God's faithfulness.

We all have access to God directly, on our own, through prayer, through study, and through service. And, every now and then, we all need a little help understanding God. We're on a faith journey, and we never walk alone.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Davidic-covenant.html>, accessed 16 March 2018.

² See Hebrews 8:6-13, 9:12, 9:15-22, 10:11, 14, 26.