

**Sermon: A New Covenant; a Bold Faith**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8**

During the season after Pentecost up to Advent, the Revised Common Lectionary offers two sets of parallel readings. The first set is called “semicontinuous” because the Hebrew Bible readings follow major stories and themes from Genesis through the prophets over the three-year cycle. The second set is called “complementary” because the readings thematically pair a Hebrew Bible reading with the Gospel reading.

That bit of insight is a good help in understanding how to interpret today’s readings.

What we heard from Jeremiah is one of several ‘promissory oracles’ which are those in which God makes a promise, and the promise here is to reunite the two former kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Both of them, watched over by God, did their best to break the old covenant, meaning the one given on Mount Sinai to Moses. In chapter one, when Jeremiah was commissioned as a prophet to the people, God said to him:

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to *pluck up* and to *pull down*,  
to *destroy* and to *overthrow*,  
to *build* and to *plant*.’ (Jeremiah 1:10).

God used the same language today, referring to what have now become past events when God watched over the destruction of the two kingdoms.

The choices made by a prior generation may influence what happens to the current generation, but for a new beginning to occur, before the communities can be rebuilt, some changes have to be made. God said, we’re going to start over, but this is how it will be.

In our Gospel reading, Luke presents a parable meant to unnerve his audience, or at least to get them back on track, to pray always and not lose heart. He did this because for them, it was taking far too long for Jesus to return.

This parable gets a lot of attention from scholars, but the core story is that a judge repeatedly refuses to grant a widow’s request, but because of her persistence and threats, he does.

On the surface, it's a simple little story with only two characters, neither of whom is perfect. We could call it the Parable of the Two Hard-Boiled Eggs.

The judge neither fears God nor respects people. He keeps his own counsel; his judgements are his own, and he is presumably impartial. All we know about the widow is that she has an anonymous opponent, and she wants the judge to deal with her situation. Right now.

If we were method actors, we might ask, what's her motivation; what is 'justice' for her?

First of all, she is very demanding. She kept coming to the judge saying, literally, "see to it that I get justice against my opponent" (18:3). Eventually the judge agrees, saying he will indeed avenge her, that he will procure justice for her (18:5).

But he does this not out of the goodness of his heart or because of his calling as a judge. The widow keeps bothering him and he's worried that she's going to give him a black eye. So, fine; she will get her vengeance at long last.

As for the judge, it might seem odd for Jesus to tell the disciples to "Listen to what the *unjust* judge says" (18:6). And I say odd first because Jesus is commending him but also because the judge did in fact grant the widow justice. So, how is he unjust?

Again, this is a translation issue. Luke actually calls the judge *unrighteous*, which fits because he neither feared God nor had respect for people. And Jesus commends him because he granted justice, regardless of the delay or his desire for personal safety.

Both readings are simply about persistence and the power of prayer. Our old friend Amy-Jill Levine devotes a lot of book space to unraveling the respective characters of the widow and the judge, but I think Luke's point was to have us hear that God is the ultimate judge and that God will listen to our complaints. Our prayers may not be answered to our satisfaction, but Scripture tells us that God will hear them, and God will judge.

There are a few more themes that connect the two readings, and they are faith and forgiveness, and the new covenant.

The new covenant as described by God in today's reading from Jeremiah is specifically for Jews. The old way of carving the covenant on stone tablets didn't work so well after they were hidden away, and people could no longer see them. Plus, they weren't so portable. Now, God said, the new covenant will be written on our hearts; we will carry the Law within us, so we will never be without it.

And I say ‘our hearts’ because even though God was speaking to the Jews of the Exile, Jesus invites us to share in this covenant, even if we’re late coming to the party.

At the Last Supper, this is what he meant when he said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). In the Jewish seder, ‘this cup’ is the third cup out of four and it is the cup of redemption, the cup of forgiveness.

And that is a crucial part of this new covenant: God will forgive and forget our sins.

People tend to think that new is better than old. If you’re buying a house or a car, quite often this is true. But a new car can have as many problems as an old one, just of a different nature. It’s the same with a house, believe me. But problems can be fixed.

We all live in the New World, and most of us have at least a few ancestors who came from the Old World. The New doesn’t cancel out the Old. Both are still alive and active.

The same is true of the Bible. Christians study and learn from the whole thing, not just the parts with Jesus in them.

When Jesus asks, “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (18:8), he’s showing awareness that faith tends to falter over time, especially when what one is waiting for fails to arrive, in this case, Jesus’ Second Coming. Luke’s audience was anxious because it had been promised to them, but it wasn’t happening. It’s not easy to ‘keep the faith’ when injustice continues in the world and God is nowhere to be seen.<sup>1</sup>

We also get distracted by the work-life balance, or imbalance. We have work to do and bills to pay. We need to eat, every day; we need secure shelter. We may be faithful people, but God can slip our mind in the crisis of a layoff or in the sudden loss of insurance coverage.

When the hurricane comes, first we batten the hatches, then we pray.

For those caught in exile, it’s easy to conclude that either God is angry with you or else everything is out of control. But the opposite is true. God offers words of hope, promising to build and to plant, to reunite and reconcile, to forgive and make whole.

Luke’s message is that persistence pays off, and the payoff comes through urgent, bold, even impertinent, prayer. Jesus says that injustice is not the final word, that prayer transforms the injustice of the world into God’s justice, which is the justice to make things right in the world. And it is through prayer that we keep God on our minds and in our hearts.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Tannehill, R. *Luke*. Abingdon Press (1996), 265.