

*I will put my law within in, and I will write it on their hearts;
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

There are many stories about covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures. Think of Noah and the rainbow, and Moses and the stone tablets. In today's beautiful reading, the prophet Jeremiah speaks of a covenant written not in rainbow or stone – not on anything external – but written deep inside, on the very hearts of the people.¹

Jeremiah was writing to a people in exile – a people who had watched the center of their universe – Jerusalem – be destroyed as they were led away in chains to captivity.

The first 30 chapters of Jeremiah is full of the prophet scolding the people for their sin and lack of faithfulness in God. But where we pick up reading today, he begins a new message – bringing good news, comfort, and hope. God once again has seen the suffering of God's people (like in the time of Moses), and God's heart has been touched: God forgives them.

In this time of exile God, through Jeremiah, makes sweeping promises to the people of Israel – promises of restoration and return, and most importantly, of restored relationship. Once again, as in so many covenant stories before this one, God promises to be in relationship with the people, and this time promises that they will even belong to each other: God says, I will be your God, and you... you will be my people.²

¹ Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds.

² Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds.

Writing on the heart is the image I love most from Jeremiah. In fact, this very passage was the focus of the very first paper I wrote in seminary.

Even though the Israelites have broken the covenant God made with them back in the desert at Sinai with the Ten Commandments, God in Jeremiah uses words like “new” and “heart” and “covenant” once again. The great scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures, Walter Brueggeman, calls this the “core memory” of Israel about God: that God will do today, in this bad circumstance, what God has done in the past. God will give new covenant, a new relationship, a new creation.³

And here it is a thing of the heart. Not external, but inscribed deep within – something that cannot be lost.

It is therefore interesting how often we contrast the God of the “Old Testament” (Hebrew Scriptures) and the God of the “New Testament.” The former is usually depicted as harsh, punishing, angry, wrathful – and the latter as kinder, gentler, and loving, the Good Shepherd.

And yet this story in Jeremiah, and so many others in the Hebrew Scriptures if you look for them, shows a God that has abiding love and compassion for a people who want to love and be faithful to God, but keep falling away to sin and temptation.

Love – this matter of the heart – is always at the center of it all. It is what connects **all** of our sacred stories.

And love is what is at the center of our most sacred story as Christians – the story we will enter again next Sunday: the procession into Jerusalem and the events following that led to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

³ Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds.

We claim love as the center of that story most often because of the resurrection. We are Easter people we proudly say. And yet we are not **only** Easter people – we are **also** Good Friday people. We can't have the reconciliation of Easter without the experience of exile found in Good Friday.

Yet scholar Kathryn Matthews writes that the day that falls between those two, Holy Saturday, is perhaps the place we live most of our lives.

Holy Saturday is often skipped over in our Holy Week observances. It is an empty day. Christ is in the tomb, and all creation waits. One of my favorite images for Holy Saturday comes from a Godly Play story which describes Holy Saturday in this way: Saturday was so quiet you could almost hear the earth breathing.

Holy Saturday is sometimes called the longest day, a day of waiting. It is a not-yet, in-between time that in many ways describes our lives.⁴

We know about Good Friday, the cross, sorrow and death – we've had these experiences in our own lives. We also know about Easter hope, trust in promises, and the hint of resurrection for all of us because Jesus is risen from the dead.⁵

But our lives are not all about Good Friday or Easter Day. In between birth and death and what's beyond, we live – remembering we are dust and to dust we will return, and also knowing that we are bound for glory. And so we wait, with longing, and we understand a little more why faith is best described as trust.⁶

⁴ Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds.

⁵ Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds.

⁶ Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds.

This is why words of comfort, like those found in Jeremiah today, are so important – they are reminders to **continue trusting**. The hope offered is not just for long ago, but for today as well.

We live in a time of great change and uncertainty. We say this as if any times have ever been certain – and yet these days are ours. So when the anxiety and fear of change rise up, two images from today's scripture readings offer us a way to continue to trust.

The first is that God's covenant is written on our hearts. God's love is abiding – there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, there is nothing we can do to make God love us less, there is nothing we can do to separate ourselves from God's love.

And the second is the image of the seed found in John's gospel. Jesus tells those gathered around him that *unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

We can read this in so many ways, and it certainly points to Jesus' death and resurrection.

But a way it can offer comfort, **and** challenge, to us, is to understand that change can lead to new life – something God is always calling us into. This idea is exemplified in last week's "Wisdom Wednesday" post on our Facebook page.

The post featured a cartoon with four panels. In the first, a seed is buried in the dark earth and thinks, "Ah, this is the life. I could stay here forever." In the second scene, the seed is beginning to crack open and a root tendril is pushing out. The seed is saying, "Wait...what's happening to me?"

The third picture is the seed well and truly burst open and taking root, though still totally underground, saying, “Oh God! The pain! Kill me now!” And the final panel shows a sprouted plant, with roots below and new leaves above with a blue sky in the background, with a single statement, “Huh...”

The green blade rises, and what was first experienced as total destruction, reveals itself to be new life. Huh.

Even as we live Holy Saturday lives – in between Good Friday and Easter Day – we can take comfort in our trust that Good Friday **will lead** to Easter Day.

Next week we enter Holy Week. I invite you to attend as many of the services that week as you can. The journey is like no other for deepening faith and trust. And it is that journey that is our root, pushing us up into life.

~ AMEN ~

