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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, Montana

March 18, 2018

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

Let us pray. Grant us, O God, to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word to do your will through Christ our Lord. Amen

The Old Testament readings for the Sundays in Lent this year proclaim the covenants God has made throughout history. We began with the covenant God made with all creation following the Flood, promising never to destroy the world like that again.

Then we moved to what can be called the Ancestral Covenant made with Abraham and passed down to his son Isaac and his son Jacob, whom God renamed Israel. God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants so that they would become a great nation and a blessing to others.

The third Sunday we heard about the Ten Commandments which served as a portion of the covenant God made with the people of Israel in the wilderness. This is sometimes known as the Sinai Covenant because Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive the tablets. God committed to being God to the people, dedicated to them as a husband is to a wife and with the expectation that the people were to serve and obey God alone.

But Israel was not a faithful spouse to God. They did not trust God to provide for them. And even after God led them into the Promised Land following their time in the wilderness, they turned to the gods of other nations over and over and over again.

That repeated disobedience and infidelity on the part of God's people resulted in the division of Israel, which led to being overthrown first by Assyria and then by Babylon. The people who survived were taken into exile and it is then that Jeremiah speaks to the people in our reading today, declaring a new covenant God will make with them.

We all know what it's like when relationships end, especially marriages. Even in this age when divorce is more commonplace and carries less of a social stigma than it once did, ending a marriage is hard. Two people made commitments to one another. The dream of the long life they expected to share together goes up in smoke. A kind of emptiness follows these decisions, even when we know it is in the best interest for both people.

God's people in exile knew this emptiness. They were lost, disoriented, and wondered if there was any way to reunite with God. And there wasn't—at least there wasn't anything THEY could do. Psalm 51 could have easily been their words. This morning we read it from the translation called "The Message" by Eugene Peterson. In a more modern speech we prayed with the ancient people, "You're the One I've violated, and you've seen it all, seen the full extent of my evil...God, make a fresh start in me...Bring me back from my gray exile."

It is a rare thing when two people decide to get married again after a divorce. I know a few couples like that. During their time apart, both husband and wife go through a time of self-

reflection and often a change both in heart and in behavior. When they get back together, they make a new marriage covenant. The vows they make the second time around reflect in more realistic terms the ways their life together will be different than it was the first time. The same is true for people who get married to different partners the second time around.

When Eric and I were about to leave our home in Washington and head to Alaska, we saw that as a turning point time in our lives. We were leaving the place where we raised our children and were heading into our empty-nest season of life. I was also at the point in my seminary journey that we could see that we would soon be open to a call to an unknown place. The future was wide open, as exciting as it was scary. So before we left, we gathered at the church with a couple of friends and our daughter and renewed our marriage vows.

Though we had not been divorced, we had lived apart for some time because of Eric's work in Alaska, and now we would be living in the same place every day. Renewing our marriage covenant was an important ritual for us as we started out in that new season together.

God made a new covenant with the people in exile. Soon they would return to Jerusalem, or disperse somewhere into their homeland territory. God realized that a new covenant was needed in order to live into a new kind of relationship. This new covenant would be connected and ongoing with the covenants made to their ancestors, but the people and God were not quite the same as before the exile and they needed a new way of being in relationship with one another.

The new covenant would not be like the Sinai covenant that was based on the external boundaries of the Law. God knew what the people were capable of—or more accurately that they were not capable of keeping the law. Though the law would still be a guide and God's desire for the way they lived, the new covenant would rely solely on God's grace and God's suffering.

God promised to place the law within the hearts of the people so that they would each know God—from the youngest to the oldest, the leaders to the ordinary citizens. God promised to forgive their sins, fully knowing their tendency to stray. This covenant would be based on God's commitment and fidelity to the people as God's free and generous gift.

No matter what, God would be their God, even to the point of suffering for the sins of the people. The new covenant at the time of Jeremiah was for the people in exile. The new covenant we have in Jesus Christ is an echo, a renewal of that same covenant. Jesus certainly embodied God's grace, and on the cross Jesus suffered to defeat "the ruler of this world"—the power of sin that tries to draw us away from God.

This is the covenant we receive in Holy Baptism. We do not come to the font with our résumé proving our worthiness to receive God's grace. We do not come having passed the test on how well we keep commandments or memorize scripture or pray with a designated depth of devotion. The covenant of Baptism is not a covenant of the head, it is a covenant of the heart.

At the font God comes to us and fills our hearts with what we need to live as God's people. We are given God's own Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in God's presence.

We also receive the gift of Christian community. At each baptism we as a congregation voice our commitment to the newly baptized to support them in their lives of faith. This reminds us of the covenant we hold in common and we are renewed in our commitments to learn together, pray together, and to love one another through the ups and downs of this life as we each feel the pressures of this world.

Jesus Christ came into the world to embody the heart of God. That is what the people in our gospel reading wanted, after all. They didn't want to just "see" Jesus; they wanted to know him and to enter into relationship with him.

In Holy Baptism we enter into a covenant relationship with God through Jesus, and that means that we also enter into the grace-filled and sacrificial life that Jesus lived. Apart from this relationship we are lost. Living within God's covenant our hearts are formed to love and serve God and our neighbors with the same grace and generosity we have received from God.

The new covenant God made with Israel has been renewed with all believers in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Though we still struggle to love God and one another as faithfully as we ought, we can place our trust in God's promise to love and forgive us.

May the Lord our God grant us the joy of our salvation, and sustain us with a willing spirit to live as God's faithful people.

Thanks be to God! Amen