

*“The time is coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.*

³² *It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.*

³³ *“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.*

*“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.*

³⁴ *No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the LORD.*

*“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)*

God Has Given Us a New Covenant

Have you ever wanted to just start over? Eight or ten years ago, I bought an old Lincoln Continental to use for making hospital calls and going to conferences. Within a month, I had put more money into repairs than the car cost me. Every time I turned around, something else went wrong. When smoke starting pouring out of the engine block, the mechanic told me, “I wouldn’t put any more money into this car.” Sometimes you have to know when it’s time to start over. God reached the point where he decided the best thing to do was to start over. It was time to make a change in the approach he had been using to build the Church. In the message we have before us this morning from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, God tells us that he had already decided to make that change and he was just waiting for the right time to do it. What was the change? **God has given us a new covenant.**

I.

What is a covenant? It’s a contract. Under most contracts, you have an “I do/you do” arrangement. I’ll do engineering work for Ford and they’ll pay me and provide health insurance and other benefits. God made a covenant with the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. He promised that he would protect them and bring them to their own country. God promised that their armies would be unstoppable and that their farmers would be so successful that they’d have to throw out last year’s harvest to make room for this year’s. But there was one condition: Israel had to be faithful to him. They had to obey all the laws of the Mt. Sinai Covenant, and not just by going through the motions. God expected sincere obedience from the heart.

Israel broke that covenant. Again and again, they violated the most basic tenant: they worshipped idols. Under the covenant, God told them what would happen if they broke it: their armies would be defeated, their crops would fail and they would be conquered and deported from the land God was giving them. Jeremiah lived to see those threats come true. 900 years after God gave them the Mt. Sinai covenant, God sent the Babylonians to conquer his people. They burned Jerusalem to the ground. They killed the king’s sons right before his eyes and then blinded him. Then they dragged his people off to Babylon.

God sent Jeremiah to warn his people that this horrible judgment was coming. But in the midst of all the warnings and condemnations, God had Jeremiah write, **“The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”** God wasn’t going to give up on his love. In the book of Hebrews, God quotes our text for this morning and he tells us that Jesus fulfilled these words. He brought the New Covenant.

God said, **“It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt ...”** Both covenants are based on God’s grace. God led Israel out of Egypt. He made them his people. Under the Old Covenant, the people of Israel got to heaven the same way we do: through faith in Jesus. All the laws and ceremonies of the Old Covenant teach about how God was going to forgive their sins through Jesus when he came. But there was a crucial difference: the old covenant was a covenant of laws. Those laws touched every aspect of their lives. They had to follow them, even if they thought they knew better.

The Old Covenant failed because it’s too easy for people to ignore what God says or worse, to go through the motions and believe that their external obedience actually earns them something from God. God’s Old Testament people displayed both of those attitudes. There were periods of time when the people generally obeyed the covenant, but they didn’t believe in the promises that were behind it. And there were many times when the people turned from it and worshipped idols. There was always remnant that lived by faith. But too many people thought it all came down to a bunch of rules.

That illustrates the danger that we still face today under the New Covenant. According to a recent study, since 1990, the percentage of Americans who call themselves Christians has dropped by ten percent. The fastest growing religious identification in the United States is people who call themselves “non-religious.” Those numbers reflect a backlash in our society. Many people today are against churches. Just a couple of days ago, I was driving behind a car with a bumper sticker that quoted Gandhi who said that he likes Christ but not most Christians because they’re so unlike Christ. In many people’s minds, churches are all about a bunch of rules and their members are a bunch of hypocrites. Churches are only concerned with preserving their authority and their institutions whatever the cost. Now, I don’t believe that’s fair, but could it ever be true about us?

The New Covenant is supposed to be different. Jeremiah writes, **“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”** The New Covenant is a covenant of the heart. You can make almost anyone obey your rules for a while if you’re willing to stand over them every minute and force them to do what you want them to. But if they don’t want to live that way, as soon as you turn your back, they’ll go back to doing what they want to. Their obedience was empty and meaningless.

Under the New Covenant, God’s people don’t obey because we have to. We obey because we want to. Why do we want to live the way God calls us to? Because the gospel changes us. Before we know Christ, we live for ourselves. Think about babies – and I love babies. But babies, toddlers, children of almost any age believe the world revolves around them. They don’t care how hard you work all day. When they’re hungry, they want you to feed them now. How many of us parents haven’t lost our tempers because our children were being selfish and demanding? Well, guess what? They inherited that from us! That’s the way we’re all born. That selfishness is sin. We all deserve God’s punishment in hell forever.

But Jesus came to take that sin away. The heart of the New Covenant is the very last sentence in our reading for today: **“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”** The New Covenant is not an “I do/you do” arrangement. It’s a “God does” arrangement. Jesus died and paid for all our selfishness. He died for all that sin we were born with. Then he rose and now God treats us like he can’t remember our sins. When we hear that message, God reaches into our hearts and he gives us faith.

When God gave us faith in Jesus, he changed our hearts. He put a living believer inside us who wants to live as God calls us to. Now, alongside that believer, there’s also an unbeliever who hates what God says and rebels against it. Every Christian is a sinner and a saint at the same time. That’s why it’s still so hard for us to live as Christians. But the saint is there. We call him the New Man. He is the gift of God’s grace to us. Jesus died and rose for us. The Holy Spirit came to us and changed us. **God has given us a new covenant. A new covenant means a new heart.**

II.

The Church is the collection of all people whose hearts God has changed. In that sense, the Church does not mean the Lutheran Church or the Catholic Church or any other denomination. It means all those who have faith in Christ. Now, I can't see who is a believer and who isn't. But the churches we see here are only churches because they have believers in them. In this sinful world, all those organizations are halting, imperfect attempts to live our faith. That means that they do fall victim to sin. Sometimes, they even lose sight of their purpose and start to work only to preserve institutions or traditions or even rules made up by men.

Jeremiah lived at a time when you could see the results of generations of people only going through the motions. By his time, most people ignored the covenant God had made. They lived the way they wanted to live and they worshipped whatever idols felt best to them. And God's judgment followed.

But God didn't give up. He prepared a new and better covenant. With that covenant, God prepared a new and larger people: the people of faith. Under the Old Covenant, God was a husband to his people Israel. The New Testament calls the Church the bride of Christ. God said to Jeremiah, **"I will be their God and they will be my people."** That was God's ancient promise to Israel. When they broke the Old Covenant, God planned for a new Israel. Even in the Old Testament, the true Israel was the remnant who believed in God's promises. In the New Testament, all those Jewish people who trust in Jesus as their Savior are still a part of his people. But God added us to that people, too.

My friends, look how much God loved you! You were an orphan, an outcast – a Gentile. Yet God adopted you into his own people. So you are now a citizen of heaven – God promised you eternal life with him. In fact, the Bible often pictures heaven as an endless wedding reception for the Church. God has made you a part of this special people. God has obligated himself to watch over you and bring you at last to heaven.

But we aren't there yet. Israel turned away from God's Old Covenant. We New Testament believers need to understand that we, too, could walk away from God's covenant with us. How would we ever do that? One way is by making God's covenant all about rules. Do this! Don't do that! Read this little "how to" manual from the Christian book store. It will give twelve steps to being a better Christian. It will lay out forty days of purpose for you or for your church or for your marriage. Follow this blueprint and live by all these rules. That kind of so-called practical Christianity easily loses sight of Jesus. It becomes a religion in which we save ourselves. Another way is to become what so many people today think the church is: an organization that's all about protecting its traditions and its authority and its institutions. But an organization that has no love even for its own people and makes no effort to assist them in living Christian lives here.

Still another way that we could walk away from the covenant is to ignore all that God has said. No pastor can hold me to some morality that our grandparents believed in. The church has to get with the times and accept that people are going to live together and kids are going to have sex before marriage and people just aren't loyal to denominations anymore. So we reduce the church to AIDS awareness programs and turn our gaze inward and make the practice of the faith whatever feels right to me. All these approaches destroy the New Covenant because they make our ideas god. We worship what we think is right, not what God has said. And we lose the gift of eternal life.

Are we in danger of losing the covenant? We're sinners, so that means that we could always lose sight of God's love for us in Christ. But Jesus came to pay for the sin in our hearts that constantly revolts against what God has said. He came to pay for all the times the Old Man inside wins and for all the damage that we thoughtless sinners do to each other's faith by our sinful words and actions and attitudes. He died for us. Then he rose. Our guilt is gone. Our punishment is gone.

And the power of that sin is gone, too. Now, God keeps us focused on his work through the gospel. God has gathered us together to be his people. It isn't Lutheran tradition that gathers us. It isn't an ethnic heritage or a set of rules or a group of shared institutions. The gospel gathers us. God has brought us together here because God has brought us together in faith. God has attached us to the invisible people that he is gathering from every nation under heaven. He promises to preserve that people, no matter what happens to the institutions we cherish here. Whatever success we have in keeping our church focused on the gospel is a gift of God working through that message of life. But even if the WELS or Peace Lutheran church disappear, God's people cannot disappear. Because the word of the gospel stands forever. That's why this Old Testament promise means so much to us today. **God has given us a new covenant. A new covenant means a new people.**

This new people will last forever. Jesus will return and then we will live and reign with him for all eternity. This is God's plan. This people is his only plan for the rest of time. By his grace, you are part of that plan. Amen.