

*“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 Starts Over

Have you ever lost a document that you were working on? That happened to me a couple of times in college. Then I had to start all over again. Last week, one of my sons had some massive form that he had to fill out online. After spending a couple of hours on it, it wouldn't save. He was desperately trying to print it because he didn't want to start all over again. My worst experience had nothing to do with losing data. Northwestern Publishing House once asked me to write a book. I spent a couple of years researching it and writing it and then I emailed it to them. After a few weeks, they contacted me and told me that they really didn't like the way I wrote it. I had to re-write the whole thing. Of course, the more effort and time you put into something, the harder it is to start over. Sometimes, we have to start over at life. A marriage ends or you lose a job that you've spent years working at or your house burns down after a decade of getting everything the way you wanted it, and then you have to start over. In our Old Testament lesson for today, God tells us that he was going to start over. He had put nine hundred years into the Old Covenant with Israel. And he was still planning to invest six hundred more. But in the end, he knew he was going to begin again. That's what he prophesied this morning and that's what we see during Lent: **God starts over.**

I.

God said to Jeremiah, **“The time is coming ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”** God could already see where his current project was going. It was going to end, so he told his people that. **God starts over. He makes a new covenant.**

Now, what is a covenant? It's a contract. It says, “You do this, and I'll do that.” When you buy a new car, you sign a contract. You promise to pay so much a month until that car is paid for. The dealership then transfers ownership of that car to you and promises to warranty the car for a specific period of time. If you don't write the checks, sooner or later, the dealership is going to demand that you return the car. If you don't, they're going to sue. Likewise, if they don't provide the service under the warranty, you're going to sue – you're going to ask the government to enforce the contract. That's why contracts work.

Who is going to make God honor his part of a contract? Nobody. There is no power in the universe that can make God do anything. But God still makes a covenant, a contract with his people. God bends down from heaven and binds himself to us. He doesn't have to do that. But he loves us so much that he does. And what compels him to keep his word? Nothing but who he is. He is the God of love. He swears by himself that he will honor every letter of every promise he makes to us. Why does he do all that? Because we understand contracts. And he wants us to know just how committed he is to us.

So God made a covenant with his people at Mt. Sinai. They had to follow all its laws about what they could eat and how they were supposed to worship and even live. God promised that if they did, he would make them into a great nation. Their enemies would run from them. Their crops would be so abundant that they would have to throw out last year's harvest to make room for this year's. They would live in peace and prosperity. That was the contract. And it was purely an act of God's grace. He didn't have to choose this nation of slaves and make them into a great people. They weren't greater or more holy or more attractive than anybody else. God simply loved them and picked them up out of the gutter and made this contract with them. In fact, he compares that contract to a wedding covenant. He took Israel by the hand and led them out of Egypt and married them. The Old Testament prophets love that picture: Israel is God's bride.

But then God told Jeremiah he was going to make new covenant with his people. Why? Because they broke the old one. God didn't. He spent the better part of nine hundred years honoring the spirit of a contract that Israel had long since trampled in the dust. And that contract said that if Israel was unfaithful, the sky would withhold the rain and the ground would be as hard as rock and they would starve. They would flee from their enemies and finally, they would go into exile. God did finally invoke that clause of the contract. But he waited centuries to do it.

There was nothing wrong with the Old Covenant. In the fact, it had an even greater purpose: to prepare God's people to recognize Jesus when he came. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the perfect high priest who stands between us sinners and God. All that was part of what the Old Covenant taught. So it was a good covenant. It was a gift of God's grace to Israel. But he had to throw it out because the people refused to follow it. In the Old Testament, again and again, they bowed down to idols. In the New Testament, they went through the motions of following God, but really, they worshipped themselves and their righteousness. They thought God owed them heaven. They were unfaithful and finally the Old Covenant had to die.

But God did not abandon them even then. When they were so guilty, God promised, **“I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”** “I will bind myself again to a contract of love. I will obligate myself to show grace and mercy to a people who don't deserve it. And it won't be like that Old Covenant where they had to do something so that I would do something.” The New Covenant is all about what God does. It's only about what God does. What is the New Covenant? It's forgiveness. God takes away all that we are guilty of and puts it on Christ. The New Covenant is God promising us that we have a substitute, the person that all those Old Testament sacrifices were really pointing to. We have Jesus.

When the Holy Spirit descended on the Virgin Mary in power and caused her to conceive, when the Son of God entered her womb and took on human flesh, God began to start over. When God the Father abandoned his Son on the cross of Calvary to suffer all the hell that we deserve, and when his Son died on that cross, and when he rose from the dead to declare that all our sin was gone, God did indeed start over with us.

II.

Now, why us? I mean, we aren't Jewish. We never lived under the Mt. Sinai covenant. Why do I keep relating this to us? Because God does. This is our history. It leads us to the cross. **God starts over. He makes a new people.**

You see that when God speaks of a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. We tend to think of Israel as one nation. That is how it started out. But after King Solomon, Israel broke into two kingdoms. The Bible usually calls the northern kingdom “Israel” and the southern kingdom “Judah.” Israel was supremely unfaithful and a hundred years before Jeremiah wrote these words, God destroyed the northern kingdom. The Assyrians conquered them and deported them to a different part of their empire. And then the Assyrians were conquered themselves. The house of Israel disappeared from history. By the time Jeremiah lived, they were simply gone.

But God promised to make a new covenant with them and with Judah, which was about to go into exile, too. While God did preserve the people of Judah and bring them back home seventy years later, that northern people never returned. When Jesus was born, they had been gone for seven hundred years. So what did God mean here? One place to see the answer is that wedding picture. The Old Testament prophets say again and again that Israel was God's bride, his wife. What does the New Testament say? It calls the Christian Church the bride of Christ. Then when you dig a little deeper, you discover that again and again, the New Testament calls the Church the true Israel, the true people of God. It does it so many times and in so many ways that I can't even list them all for you this morning. But that tells us what God was doing. The Old Testament prophets call Israel a whore who slept around and sold herself to other gods. But they also say that there was always a faithful few within Israel and Judah who followed the Lord. God combined that faithful few with believing Gentiles and built his true people – not an ethnic people, but a people of faith.

So how do you become part of that people? God has to change your heart. That's what God told Jeremiah: **“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time. ... 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.”** Notice who makes all the difference here: God. He writes on our hearts. He changes us. He makes himself our God and he makes us his people. The New Covenant means trusting the Lord. When God promises to be our God, he's promising to save us and protect us and hear our prayers and work for our good and bring us home to heaven. We are now a part of his people because he wrote that covenant on our hearts. He gave us faith.

How did he do that? Jeremiah says, **“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.”** What is the greatest sin of all? Putting something in God's place. In the end, isn't that what all sin is? So when you have faith, God has taken his rightful place in your heart. How does he get there? God forgives our sin and he forgets our wickedness. Hearing that we are forgiven – the message about Jesus – gives us faith. It makes us the true people of God.

My friends, what sins do you need to have forgiven today? What wickedness do you need God to forget? I won't ask you to tell the whole congregation any more than I will stand up here and announce all of mine. But God sees them all. He knows them all. There are days when I'm embarrassed to be your pastor because God knows my sin. How can I stand up here and condemn your sin when I am so guilty? Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever hope that no one ever hears about the sins that you're guilty of? Do you ever fear that God will make you pay for what you have done? That God will make you face up, publicly, to your guilt and hypocrisy? Do you ever think about the fact that every time you sin, you have made some sinful desire your god and you – like me – deserve the Lord's rejection and all the public humiliation he could pour on us?

But God forgives our sin. God forgets our wickedness. Have you ever tried to not think about something? It's pretty hard to do, isn't it? God puts our sin out of his mind forever. Today, the sins of yesterday are gone. God has wiped us clean in the blood of Jesus. God put him on the cross to pay for us. God humiliated Jesus with the most shameful death the ancient world knew how to give, so that God can honor us as his children, as his chosen people, as the ones that he has always loved and will always love.

For us, starting over is never easy. When I lost those papers in college, I was very frustrated – tempted even to say some very unpastoral things about my computer. If I had to start my life over, I wonder if I would have the strength to do it. God had to start over. In one sense, he always planned to do that. The Old Covenant was designed to be temporary until Jesus came. But God always wanted his people to live by it and join us in the true Israel of God. So, for God, there was no frustration at sending Jesus. For God, it was not a disappointment when his Son died. That's why he sent him. So God started over with the New Covenant by fulfilling all the promises of the Old Covenant. You and I have those promises. You and I are part of a great worldwide people, a nation that crosses borders and defies the limits of time and space. We are part of a people that only God can see because we have the covenant that God gave us in Christ. Rejoice to be his people and to have the covenant of forgiveness. Amen.