

*“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)*

This is the New Covenant!

Do you ever just want something new? Maybe the car that you bought new seven or eight years ago, that you were so happy and excited to get, has gotten old. With all the mileage and the little nicks and dings and things that just don't work as well as they used to, you begin to look forward to the day when you can replace it. Has that ever happened to you? It has to me. This morning, God talks to us not about a new car, but a new covenant. You can hear how much he's looking forward to that new covenant and how frustrated he is with the Old one. Now, God himself gave that Old Covenant at Mt. Sinai. But 900 years later, when Jeremiah lived, he wanted to go on to a new one. Now that new covenant would not come for almost 600 more years, but God was announcing it already. That covenant matters today, on Reformation Day, because it is the heart and soul of all that we Lutherans believe. Jeremiah stands in the distant past and points to Christ and says to us: **“This is the new covenant!”**

I.

What is a covenant? It's really a contract. “You do this and I'll do that.” In the ancient world, kings and overlords made covenants with subject peoples. The king would promise to protect them and provide for them and the people would promise to pay taxes and obey and honor the king. The Mt. Sinai covenant fit that modal – God the King promised to protect and provide for his people and they promised to obey him. But for all that to be true, they had to really be his people. God chose a race of slaves and he freed them and made them his own. The most basic part of the Old Covenant was that he would be their God and they would be his people. That's true about the New Covenant, too. **This is the new covenant: God claims his people!**

God said, **“The time is coming ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”** Israel here means the northern kingdom and Judah means the southern kingdom. The people of Israel had broken into these two countries. So it sounds like God is claiming the same people. But you have to know where we are in history. Jeremiah lived at the very end of Judah's existence as an independent country. About a century earlier, the northern kingdom, had been destroyed. They were carried

away into exile and disappeared from history. They were gone when Jeremiah wrote these words. So God was not talking about the Old Testament people. He was talking about a new people, a people the Bible again and again calls the new Israel. He was talking about the Christian Church.

When you buy a new car, you decide what you want to be the same and what you want to be different. When God planned for a new covenant, he did the same thing. He 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, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them.”** The new covenant had to be different because the people broke it. God did his part. He protected and provided for them again and again. But they had promised to honor, serve and obey him. They just didn’t do it. Already at Mt. Sinai, they built a golden calf and said that it was the god that had brought them out of Egypt. During the next 900 years, the people turned away from God again and again. After grace upon grace, after bringing them back over and over again, God finally said, “Enough!” It was time to replace a physical, ethnic people with a spiritual people, a people who trusted in him. So God made one other change: the New Covenant would not be a “you do this and I’ll do that” arrangement. It would be only an “I’ll do this” arrangement. God forgives. God loves. God creates faith. Only then do we respond.

But that doesn’t mean that everything was different. The Old Covenant and the New Covenant have two central features that are the same. The first one is that they are both based on grace. We often think of the Mt. Sinai covenant in terms of all the laws and regulations God gave. Because the people focused so much on those laws, the New Testament often condemns the Mt. Sinai covenant as a book of rules. But the problem was the way the people understood those laws. The laws came after an act of grace. God chose his people. He didn’t pick the superpower of the day. He didn’t pick a nation that everyone looked up to and wanted to be like. He chose slaves. He picked a powerless and despised people who were ignored by everyone but the people that owned them. He reached down from heaven and brought them to Mt. Sinai, where he spoke out loud and claimed them. All that was grace.

Jeremiah says that God was a husband to Israel. The New Testament calls the Church the bride of Christ. Those statements are about God’s grace – he chooses the poor, ugly, low class girl that nobody wants. He makes her a queen. Martin Luther taught us to say that we are saved by grace alone. God chose us. He didn’t owe us anything. He didn’t see anything beautiful or desirable in us. He didn’t pick the good people, the people who most deserved to get to heaven. In fact, he didn’t pick an ethnic people at all. He chose us, people that St. Paul describes as poor and unimportant in our world, people that the rest of the world looks down on. God chose sinners like you and me and he made us his people by giving us faith in Christ.

Christ is the other thing that both covenants have in common. In the Old Covenant, God gave sacrifices and rituals that taught his people that a sacrifice was coming that would truly wash their sins away. The blood of Christ is the fulfillment of that promise. The Old Covenant taught that through laws and rules. St. Paul says that God treated Israel like children and made them do things with the law so that when they grew up spiritually they would understand. Again, they focused so much on the temporary laws and rituals that they missed the meaning. But the meaning was always Christ. The New Covenant is all about seeing him and believing in him, without the need for sacrifices and rituals that illustrate the point.

God used Martin Luther to teach us that, because the Catholic Church made exactly the same error that Israel made: they turned grace and love into rules. Luther grew up terrified of God. He hated him for piling up rules and judgment. Only when Luther understood the gospel did he really understand God. Unlike Luther, we’ve grown up in the shadow of the cross. We’ve grown up in the wake of the Lutheran Reformation. But you now what? The need for reformation didn’t end in 1517 when Luther nailed the 95 Theses on the castle church door in Wittenberg, or in 1546 when Luther died, or in 1580 when the Book of Concord was published. In every generation, the devil tries to take God’s grace away from us. He wants us to believe that we’re going to heaven because we deserve to be forgiven or because we’re good people or because we’re really spiritual. Nothing could be farther from the truth because that really amounts to worshipping ourselves. The fact that we find that teaching attractive, shows how far from God our hearts are by nature.

But Jesus died because we modern day Christians still have an old man who wants to save himself. Jesus died because in this life our hearts will never be one hundred percent right with him. Jesus died and he paid for all our sin. He rose and announced that we are forgiven. Jesus came to us in the gospel and gave us

faith and changed us from being slaves to sin and made us members of the true Israel. We are God's people. And we will live with him forever.

II.

The rest of Jeremiah's prophecy deals with what it means to be a part of that people of God who live under the New Covenant. Jeremiah was looking forward and seeing us and our faith. **This is the new covenant: God changes our hearts.**

The Old Covenant was supposed to change hearts, too. And God shows us many Old Testament believers whose hearts were changed. We'll see those believers in heaven. But the Old Covenant was designed to be temporary. Like a first car or a first home, it was always going to be replaced. It didn't fail, however, because it was temporary. It failed because the hearts of most of the people didn't change. So they began to adopt the practices and the gods of the peoples around them, even while they still went through the motions of obeying the laws God had given them. They thought that if they offered the sacrifices and kept the dietary laws, God would be satisfied, even while they were also worshipping idols.

They were horribly wrong. In the end, God destroyed his people. But he preserved a remnant, a group of survivors who were faithful to him. From them he rebuilt his Old Testament people. Then Jesus came and sent Jews out into the world to found the Christian Church and recreate Israel as God wanted it to be. The Christian Church is and has to be a religion of the heart. You can't just go through the motions. It's not enough to just show up and twiddle your fingers and think about the game this afternoon until that guy up front stops talking. It can't be about how much money or time we give. It has to be about the change in our hearts. It has to be about faith, first and foremost. Luther taught us that we are saved by faith alone. Not by our works, or our contributions, or our effort. By our trust in Christ as our Savior.

Jeremiah said it this way: **“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.”** God puts his law on our minds and writes it on our hearts. That's the difference: God's law – his teaching really – is now part of us. God reached into our hearts and put a new man there who knows and cares what he says. We didn't do that to ourselves. God changed us.

How? 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.”** Now, Jeremiah is not saying that we don't need pastors and teachers. He's saying that if you're part of the new Israel, you don't need to be brought in any more. Old Testament Israel wasn't like that. You were born into the people. So even though you were part of Israel, someone still had to teach you to know the Lord. It's different for us. Even if you came into the kingdom through infant baptism, you do have faith in Christ – you know him. Certainly, we all need to know him better. But every believer knows the Lord.

God tells us: **“they will all know me ... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”** God has forgiven our wickedness, even though that old man is still in our hearts raging against God. God has forgotten our sins, even though you and I are often haunted by the things we've done. When God told us that, he gave us faith. That's when he put the new man in our hearts. Now we live for him, even though we sin every day. We are his. We aren't just going through the motions. We are new and different people. Knowing that is the very heart of the Lutheran Reformation.

God always planned to give us that gift. It's the new car he was always going to buy us. We have that New Covenant. We hear about Jesus every week. In fact, we hear that we're forgiven so much that it's easy for that message to become “same old, same old.” In my last church, a member once complained to the chairman of the board of elders, “All he ever does is tell us that we're sinners and tell us that we're forgiven.” Well, my friends, I'm sure it's true that I could use new ways to say it. I will spend the rest of ministry growing in my understanding of God's Word so that I can show you more and more of what God says. But the New Covenant is just this: God has forgiven our wickedness and he remembers our sins no more through Jesus. For two thousand years, the devil has been trying to get the Christian Church to forget that, to trade in a Rolls Royce for a beat up old Yugo, to think that we can somehow get to heaven on our own, because we're good people. God used Martin Luther to point us back to Christ. We have the new covenant. We have the Rolls Royce because God loved us and gave it to us. Never let that blessing go! Amen.