



**An Easter Covenant**  
**Jeremiah 31:27-34 & Luke 24:13-35**  
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Easter in Exile. That is what 2020 has brought us. Want it or not, like it or not, this is the hand this year has dealt us. So what are we to do with it?

I named last week, that I was getting weary of so many folks – especially church leaders – asking the question, “How are we going to welcome ourselves back into the church when it is safe to do so?” When, where, and how will that celebration take place?

Don’t mistake my skepticism when I say, I think we’re skipping forward too fast if, as soon as the Easter Sunday celebration is over, we jump to ... well, we jump ahead as if we’ll be gathered back in this space sometime soon. Believe me when I say, *I want you back here*. Not only do I love you and miss you dearly ... but, honestly, there is nothing more challenging than standing in an empty room preaching by yourself ... or even preaching to a very small green light in the back of the room on a stationary camera. And if you know me, you know I could talk to a brick wall ... so believe me when I say, I want you back.

But, like Jeremiah speaking to Israel while they were in exile in Babylon, I feel like what we’re being told – and what is best for humanity on the whole – is that we should prepare to stay put, and learn what it means to celebrate God’s good work in Christ’s resurrection as Easter people ... while in Exile. It’s Easter in Exile.

As a people in exile, I think it’s important to name that the work of God – our participation as the church in God’s work – does not cease while in exile. As we read and heard Jeremiah proclaim last week, God is no less present with us in our homes, or our apartments, or our neighborhoods than God was previously when we gathered together in this space. God is very much present with us in there here and now, and is inviting us to continue the work of *shalom-making* (peace-making) wherever we have found ourselves isolated and socially distanced.

Today’s text in Jeremiah 31, and our Gospel passage in Luke 24, invite us to consider how a time in exile ... how a time apart ... prepares us for the future. How is what we’re doing now allowing us to participate in God’s continual work that began before now, is ongoing in the here and now, and will continue in the future?

Jeremiah is writing to the Israelites in exile. He’s already told them that this will not be a short period of time, and that the best thing they can do in this exilic period is to settle down in Babylon – to make homes, create families, and to prepare to stay a while. He invites them to participate in God’s work of seeking the shalom (the well-being, peace, and justice) of their

captor's homeland. He tells them to pray for their enemies, for only through Babylon's shalom will they find their shalom.

Here in chapter 31, the exile has already lasted some time, and Jeremiah is writing to remind them that this is not all for not, but that God is continuing to lead them into a better time to come. The prophet is offering some hope of what the future will look like, even amidst a challenging time in exile. Jeremiah begins, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals." ... Jeremiah is saying exactly what it sounds like; he's offering that the Lord will ensure they are fruitful and multiply. The first thing promised here is a physical future.

Then, beginning in verse 31, Jeremiah offers, "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke. ... But this covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, I will put within them, I will write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

It was common thought at the time, the prophets leave little question, that the exile they were experiencing was due to a failure of faithfulness to the prior covenant. They were struggling with the consequences of being disobedient to God. The covenant given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai was written in stone – commandments, laws, rules, governance, that were intended to keep the relationship between God and people, and between people and people healthy and holy. The Torah – the Jewish laws – were offered to maintain what God expected to be an integral part of preserving the shalom that God desired for all of creation. And, when the people failed to be steadfast in keeping these rules, the prophets declared God found ways to let them know of the disappointment of the divine. From floods to exiles, the people were made known of God's frustration.

So, here, while in exile, while suffering the prophetic punishment of their failure to maintain the covenant, God is now saying, "You know what, I think going forward, I'm just going to do something different. This ... this whole thing ... it isn't working. ... And to be honest, it's not me, it's you."

Try as God might, the people of God were unable – or unwilling – to live into the covenant God had created for them. And, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. God didn't exactly give the people right of refusal on the covenant. The covenant of God didn't require human consent or willingness – there was no room for negotiation. Moses wasn't up on the mountain trying to barter a better deal; Moses was just the conveyor of a message. Don't shoot the messenger, right?

And yet here, while in exile, Jeremiah is speaking on behalf of God and promising that a new covenant is coming. We're not told the content of the covenant, we're just told that it's on its way. And this new covenant will be offered in a very different way. No longer will God rely on a

legal code inscribed in stone. “In the future, God would not just give a law as done on Sinai after the exodus from Egypt. That was a law written on stone, which the people could disobey. Rather, in the future, there would be a new covenant in which God would write the law within them, on their hearts.”<sup>1</sup> So much for the rights of the people; God is not offering a choice, God is implementing without permission. Like an automatic software update, which you can’t refuse, God is downloading a new covenant directly to the core of our being – and it will be written on our hearts. Sounds a little socialist to me, to insist on a new rule in which we can’t opt out, that provides for the well-being of everyone, in which we will have no choice but to share in God’s way of life?

The people of God had failed to be faithful; they had failed in their graciousness towards one another; they had abused the earth; they had sought to usurp the authority of God. Though the prophets declared the people of Israel deserved every bit of punishment the exile put upon them, because they had broken every bit of the covenant God has set before them, God speaks, saying, “This is not what I want for my people. I will do a new thing.”

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As Jesus walked down the road to Emmaus with the two disciples in Luke 24, the eyes of the disciples were kept from knowing it was Jesus. When they first met on the road, the disciples were confused by his presence and his lack of understanding. Jesus asks them, “What are you talking about as you travel?” The one disciple, Cleopas, responded, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” (Isn’t it ironic?)

Jesus responds, “What things?” So Cleopas continued, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. We had hoped he would redeem Israel. And moreover, some of the women of our group astounded us, saying they had gone to his tomb, and that he was not there. And they said angels told them he was alive; so some of the others with us went to check, and they found the tomb empty.” (A little too ironic.)

Like the women who stood before the man they thought to be the gardener at the tomb, so too do these men stand before the one they thought to be a random stranger.

Without opening their eyes to his identity, Jesus then begins with Moses and all the prophets to interpret the Holy Word of the Hebrew Scriptures, to show how the scriptures offered clarity to the events that had happened to himself ... to Jesus. I can only imagine that Jeremiah 31 is among those texts, which Jesus would have used in his storytelling with the men on the road to Emmaus. Jesus is the fulfillment of the new covenant – a covenant that was sealed in the life, death, and resurrection. Jesus says himself, in Luke 22:20, as he sat at the table in the upper room with the disciples over the last supper, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new

covenant in my blood.” In the death of Christ, in the conquering of the grave by God in Christ, we see this new covenant enacted.

Defined by Jeremiah in chapter 31:34, the foundational tenant of this new covenant rests upon the words of God, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” Hebrews 8, in quoting Jeremiah 31, confirms that, while under the old covenant, God sought obedience through punishable actions, in the new covenant, Christ has become a mediator through which sin is forgiven.

This new covenant, enacted by God in Christ, no longer requires a written or stone inscribed list of rules and regulations. Instead, this new covenant is inscribed on our hearts – it offers a way of living in relationship with God and one another that cannot be denied. Our mere *existence* is sufficient for understanding God’s way, and for understanding right relationship with one another, based on this underlying promise that our sin shall be forgiven.

And so, as a people in exile, we have to wonder, what did the Israelites expect this new covenant would look like post-exile? What difference would this new covenant of God look like that offered them such a hope to get through their exilic period in Babylon? We’ll get into this a bit more in the coming weeks, but I think there is a foundational understanding of this new covenant, which beckons us, even now in our own exile to have a hope for the future.

Jeremiah says, the foundational idea of this new covenant is that we will *not* have our iniquity held against us, but that our sin shall be forgiven. In Luke 24, the disciples on the road with Jesus were kept from knowing his true identity. Jesus was going to leave them when they arrived at Emmaus, but they insisted in the way of hospitality, that he stay with them for the night. As they gathered at the house – they were at table with one another. And Jesus took the bread, he blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them. And there, in that moment, in the breaking of the bread, in the memorial meal, in the sacramental memory, the disciples had their eyes opened, and they recognized Jesus. Only when they remembered Jesus’ words – when they recalled their own forgiveness – when they acknowledged that God had done for them what they could not do for themselves – were they able to fully encounter and recognize the risen Lord.

When we say, we’re *making a place for everyone to know God’s love*, is it this kind of revelation we’re talking about. When we say we’re *making a place for everyone to know God’s love*, it means we yearn for everyone to see themselves as God see us – with the same clarity that helped these disciples see Jesus in the breaking of the bread, in the memory of the sacrament. And I can’t help but wonder if that’s what the exiles were hoping for upon their return from Babylon – if that is what the new covenant meant for them – if that’s where the hope came from ... If for the exiles, the promise of a new covenant was that there would be judgement no longer – not from God, nor from one another ... If the forgiveness of God’s new covenant – a unnegotiated law written upon our hearts – meant that they could finally live into the fullness of their being without fear or persecution ... If the promise of a new covenant didn’t mean that

for each of them, they would return from exile without the same concern for their well-being they had before the exile began.

See, we're in exile, and we have a lot of people who are yearning for things to open back up and to return to the status quo. And I can't help but think, perhaps the best reason for us to stay in exile is just that – because we can't go back to the status quo. We can't keep living in a world where those who make the least money are shown to be some of the most essential in the midst of a global pandemic. We can't keep living in a society that deems some are unworthy of healthcare or education or housing or access to food simply because of the color of their skin, or the mistakes of their past, or the country of their origin, or their language they speak. Because that was the fear of the Israelites – that they would never be good enough in a global society. That they would always be slaves to some other empire: if it wasn't Egypt, it was Assyria ... if it wasn't Assyria, it was Babylon.

God says, I'm going to do a new thing – I am offering a new covenant – and it's marked by the love of the divine in ensuring no one would be condemned for their sin, but that we each might live fully into our divinely-gifted identities. Because that is the promise of Easter – the fulfillment of the new covenant – that we each might celebrate the life – the new life – we have been gifted in the resurrection of Christ – in the promise that death does not win out – in the declaration of God that we are each worthy of such almighty love.

It is Easter in Exile, and God has a promise, that in Christ, in the resurrection, a new covenant is born. May this season of exile in our lives lead us to claim God's promise not just for ourselves, but for everyone born, that everyone may know God's almighty love. For exile is not just a season of isolation; for God's people, exile is the promise of renewal and new life. Like Easter Saturday – a quiet day – this is not a forgotten time; this is a time for us to hear God's promise that new life comes to all. For the glory of God, let us share in the Easter promise.

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<sup>i</sup> Woody Bartlett. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.