



rehab: Promise
Jeremiah 31:31-34
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Hosanna – Hosanna!

These are the words of the crowds as Jesus made his triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. These are words of welcome, shouts of proclamation, and cries of hope and joy.

For three years, Jesus travelled the Judean countryside - from Galilee to Jericho, and from Nazareth to Caesarea Philippi. He impressed the people with his proclamation of God's will. He won the hearts of people by offering God's mercy to even the most outcast of the community. He wowed the people with his miracles of healing and levitation. He has nearly convinced the people that it's time for him to march in and lead the Jewish revolt against the oppressive Roman regime who controls the region.

Jesus keeps indicating that something's about to happen. This momentous occasion is not far off. To the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus says, "The hour is coming when you will worship neither here nor in Jerusalem, but in spirit and truth ..." Shortly thereafter, after healing the lame man, Jesus says, "The hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of God, and come out of their graves ..." To Andrew and Philip, Jesus proclaims, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified ..."

Whatever this promise is, whatever this occasion looks like, Jesus has been preparing his followers for it, and it seems to be coming ever more closely. In Matthew's Gospel, in the 21st chapter, it seems we are at the precipice of such a momentous occasion. Jesus and his disciples had come near to Jerusalem, near Bethpage, at the Mount of Olives. Jesus instructed two disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them, and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you're doing, tell them, "The Lord needs them.""

The disciples did as Jesus instructed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.

Now, riding upon the donkey, Jesus begins to make his way into the Holy City – the city of power in the region – the home of the Temple – the teaching place of the Scribes and Pharisees. His promise that the time is almost here seems to be coming true. The Son of God – the healer of the Jews – the one who walks on water – the one who feeds the masses – the one who brings the dead back to life – the one who has power over the wind and the sea – the one who has expressed authority over the Temple leaders – the one who has exorcised demons – the one who ... well, you get it ... the one who has shown that he is not just another ordinary man, but has shown that he is preparing to usher in God's kingdom – *that one* – is making his entrance into the city of power to claim *God's* power! This is the event we've been waiting for!

His entrance is not just another event in the life of the city. This is like that time Prince Ali Ababwa came riding into Agrabah to win the heart of Princess Jasmine. Don't look at me like you don't know what I'm talking about. "*Prince Ali! Fabulous he! Ali Ababwa. Genuflect, show some respect – down on one knee!*" This is a big event! ... Ok, Jesus' entrance may not have had dancing camels, a float of peacocks, matts full of gold, monkeys blowing horns, or a magic carpet. ... It's quite the opposite indeed. Jesus has just a donkey on which he rides. But nonetheless, this is a big event that garners attention. People line the streets. They lay down palms as Jesus walks in, they shout out, "Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Why would the Jews come out to celebrate Jesus in such a way? What does Jesus have that the community desires so much that they would revere a wandering rabbi, shouting with acclamation that, "Here comes the Son of David! Hosanna in the highest!"?

Jesus, among his miracles, teachings, and wandering comes to offer a *promise*. A promise.

Meriam-Webster defines *promise* as "a declaration that one will do or refrain from doing something specified."

What was Jesus' promise? What did he declare that he would do? And why did it matter to the people? Why would they have been so excited for Jesus' promise to finally be coming true?

To understand the promise of Jesus, we have to zoom out a couple centuries to understand Jesus not as someone who is offering a promise, but we must see Jesus as the response to a promise made by God with God's people, Israel.

We can trace the lineage of God's promise from the days of Abraham through the great flood. We can trace the lineage of God's promise from the days of captivity in Egypt, through the wilderness, to the Promised land. We can trace the lineage of God's promise through the kings and the prophets. Each and every step of the way, God has maintained a promise. In the history of our faith, we have defined this promise using the word *covenant*.

Most often today, we use the word *covenant* when considering marriage. I was just down in Richmond yesterday with a young couple to officiate their wedding. In the ceremony, we talked about the commitment the two were making with each other as a *covenant*. In our standard marriage liturgy, after their vows, we say, "As an outward and visible sign of the marriage covenant, the couple has chosen to offer and exchange rings with one another." At the end of the service, we pray for their marriage using these words, "May God confirm your covenant and fill you with grace."

In this marital framework, *covenant* is a mutual promise. It's an agreement between two willing parties. *Covenant* is business speak for a mutually agreed upon arrangement. But this is not how we define *covenant* when talking about God's promise with us, God's people. "Throughout the Old Testament, covenants are used frequently to aid understanding of the relationship between God and people."ⁱ But these are not mutually agreed upon and negotiated agreements. *Covenant* in our the framework of our faith is based on God (the one with the power in the relationship) setting the terms

by which both parties will be expected to relate. This does require our consent or willingness – and there is no room for negotiation.

For example, when Moses ascends Mt. Sinai the second time, as recorded in Exodus 19 through 23, God lays out the expectations of God's people. Not only does God inscribe the decalogue on the two stone tablets, but when Moses comes back down from the mountain top, he has 3 chapters worth of governances to name to the people. This lengthy discourse is preceded by God's promise in Exodus 19:5, which reads, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed," God goes on, "the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

So the covenant is simple, you keep ALL THESE RULES, and I will consider you my cherished people. No, you can't negotiate the rules, and no, you can't substitute them. These are the rules, but if you follow them, *you get to be my chosen people!*

As time goes on, it becomes clear that God's people aren't very good at the whole, "keeping up our end of the deal" thing. We had failed in the past, and God had flooded the earth. God promised not to do that again. But it's clear, no matter how many judges, kings, or prophets God calls to lead the people, or proclaim that Israel better get their act together, the people are just not good at being faithful to God. This pattern of being called to faithfulness by God's chosen leaders, and failing to be faithful, lasts about 1,000 years after Moses came down from Mt. Sinai before we come upon our text for this morning in Jeremiah.

Jeremiah had been selected as a prophet by God to call the people back to faithfulness prior to the Babylonian conquest. Jeremiah's call was, if you will just obey God – keep your end of the covenant – God will not only spare you, but you could come out on top! Yet, despite Jeremiah's best efforts, the people continued in their unfaithful ways, and the Babylonians conquered the Kingdom of Israel. The people were displaced from their homes. They were forced into a foreign land and stripped of any sense of humanity.

Jeremiah lamented the fall, but held his spirits high. Jeremiah proclaimed, God doesn't want this kind of misery for you. God doesn't want you to be a broken and displaced people. God wants good things for you. Indeed, God has a hope for a future for you. ... In other words, despite your best efforts that always seem to lead to failure, God is unwilling to turn away and leave you alone, abandoned, and without a future.

That's where our text from today comes in. The people are now in exile, as broken as a people can be, and we hear Jeremiah proclaim this promise of a new covenant to come. See, God had created a covenant with great hope that it would lead to faithfulness among the people. But, as Israel failed time and time again to be faithful, God realized the old covenant just wasn't going to work. God realized that we, humanity – in all our brokenness – we will never get it right on our own. So, Jeremiah comes and proclaims on behalf of God, "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. ... In this new covenant, I will put the law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. ... No

longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

God says, in this new covenant, there won't be a choice. The law will be inscribed on our hearts. We won't even have to be taught to love God, we just *will*.

Admittedly, this is confusing. And one is right to question, is this really *good* news? If the law is written in our being, does that mean we can't go against it? Is God trying to be a socialist, who will define for us how to act, and will give us no alternative options in ensuring the well-being of the community? Or is this like Jim Carey in "Liar Liar," when he literally couldn't say lie? He was incapable of lying. Is God going to take away free will, so that we have no option to make personal decisions that may go against the will of God?

Is God going to restrict my use of colorful language when I shank a golf ball into the woods? (Perhaps God will take away my shanks?) Is God going to make it so I can't drive a couple miles per hour over the speed limit when I'm late? Is God going to restrict or redistribute any savings or wealth in my retirement plan to ensure that everyone in our community has a shelter, a place to bathe, and a warm meal each night? If God is going to write the law on my heart, what must I be prepared to give up?

Sadly, this line of questioning really misses the point of Jeremiah's prophecy and God's promise. And no doubt, this line of questioning stems from a place of privilege and power. If we are worried about God's promise taking away our free will ... if we are worried about the law being inscribed upon our hearts because of how it will negatively affect our social lives ... if we are worried about how the new covenant will be detrimental to our lucrative business practices ... if we worry about the reality of the promise, we have already failed as God's people, and are all the more in need of such a new covenant.

When Christ came and started promising that God's future Kingdom was at hand, it wasn't restricting or limiting or concerning for anyone *except* those who had power. Pay attention this week to who it is that takes Christ before Pontius Pilate to be crucified. The people – the oppressed – those under the weight of the Roman authority – those who did not have the wealth – those who were outcast – those who were lame, blind, or dead – those who wandered the Galilean country side looking for a meal – those who societally were at the bottom of the ladder, whether they were women, Samaritans, Canaanites, or others ... they were the ones who stood and lined the road with palms as Jesus entered in to Jerusalem, the same way they flocked to him in the three years prior, because of a *promise*. Because the promise of God was that his will would be inscribed on our hearts – and that we wouldn't have to be taught to love God, or to love one another, it would just be part of our humanity under this new covenant.

That's good news to the oppressed, the marginalized, and the outcast. That's good news to the broken and the broken hearted. See, those who are hurting – those in exile – those who have been conquered – those who have been cast out ... they have the most to gain from God's will being fully realized. For the will of God, as proclaimed by the prophets, does not differentiate between the poor and the wealthy as we do in the world – God says, all will be welcomed as equal. In the new vision of creation we're told there will be no death, there will be no weeping among infants, and even the sheep and

wolf will lie down together. There will be no destruction among them, but the world will be at peace – for they will all join in one accord, with one purpose, with one vision – to live the law of God as it has been inscribed on their hearts.

They cheered as Christ came forward because they believed that what Christ was about to do was to usher in the new covenant that God has promised some 600 years prior, because they knew that until God was fully in control, until humanity submitted before God, people would seek for their personal gain at the expense of others. They knew that until the promise was fully realized – until the law was written in such a way that we can't break it – that people would still care more for themselves, even if it meant abusing others. Those who had been walked on, abused for labor, demeaned, left uneducated, and unwelcomed longed for a promise that would offer them new life.

We've been using the language of rehabilitation this season of Lent to talk about how we, as broken people, can find new life. This is the last step for our rehab journey – it's that we have a promise – a invitation to a new covenant. It's a promise, that regardless what may be broken in your life – whether addiction, shame, self-deceit, self-aggrandizement, spiritual poverty, or other – God's love will reign triumphant, and you will be given new life – healed of you iniquities, cleansed of your sin, made righteous before the Lord.

But this covenant, it's not built on power. This covenant, it's not built on coercion. This covenant, it's not built by the hands of kings or kingdoms. This covenant is ushered in by a donkey riding rabbi, who will not come to overthrow the temple or the empire with might – but in his faithful witness to the will of God, Jesus will give himself that our brokenness may be healed. Jesus will take up the cross, just as sure as he takes up our sin. Jesus will give himself in love, that alone and isolated, you may know that you are loved.

This is the promise of God – for all the times God could have turned way ... perhaps even all the times God should have turned away ... God's love remains steadfast. When we failed, God found a new way. When we were in exile, God offered hope and a future. The people cheered Christ's entrance because he had come to be the answer to a aging promise. Christ came not simply to fulfill an old covenant, he was sent to rewrite and to establish a new covenant.

So hear the voice of the crowds as they proclaim, Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest heaven. For indeed, Christ has come to create even with you and me a new covenant that offers a promise of new life and hope for the future. Let us journey this week together, that we may remember the gift of God in the grace of the cross, that we, in our brokenness, may have new life. For we shall see the glory of God revealed. Thanks be to God, Amen.

¹ Jon L. Bernquist. *Feasting on the Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary; Year B, Volume 2*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.