

Sermon – Light and Heart
Sunday, March 17, 2024
Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-26
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In our first reading, Jeremiah 31:31-34, the prophet speaks words of encouragement to the Israelites in their Babylonian exile. The new covenant is linked to the covenant at Mount Sinai where Moses presented the Ten Commandments; however, what is new about Jeremiah's words is the law will no longer be an external code. The new covenant is 'within,' 'written' on one's heart rather than on stone tablets, (from the least to the greatest). The new covenant will be dynamic and universal to new times and places (reformed and always reforming). Hear now God's Holy Word.

The days are surely 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, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 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, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. Amen.

Our second reading, John 12:20-26. Prior to Jesus' arrest at the Passover Festival, when Gentiles inquire about him, Jesus announces that his hour has come and provides the metaphor of a seed falling into the ground before it yields fruit to explain the meaning of his impending death and resurrection. Jesus then emphasizes the need to hate one's life. According to New Testament Scholar Robert Kysar, this is typical of John's tendency toward exaggeration. Rather than hating one's life, it is meant to highlight the need to value our authentic, spiritual lives of the heart over our physical lives. Hear now the reading of holy scripture.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. Amen.

The title of the sermon – “Light and Heart”

The Text: *“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Jeremiah 31:33b*

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, keep us honest on our journeys—speak to us anew, write your law upon our hearts. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Many of you know that my husband is a bike commuter. Peter began commuting by bike in 2008 shortly after he transitioned from pediatric primary care to emergency medicine. Peter would leave our home in Clayton, usually in the dark, for his twelve-hour shifts at Christian Northwest Emergency Room which began at dawn or dusk. When we moved to Springfield ten years ago, Peter began commuting by bike from our home on Lake Springfield to St. John’s Hospital. Knowing that these journeys sometimes weigh heavy on my heart, Peter is diligent about wearing bright vests and riding with flashing lights that provide ample, strong rays for him to see and for him to be seen. These journeys for him are a source of peace, solace, and connection with God’s creation in the Prairie Heartland. We are both grateful for the traveling companion of light as he makes his way through the darkness.

Dr. Joanna von Wijk-Bos, a Presbyterian theologian, recalls long bicycle rides home from high school in the Netherlands where she grew up. The journey along the Poplar lined road that took her home would be long, cold, and lonely. When it became dark, she would be frightened, unsure of what was ahead. Then, far off, she would see a bike’s headlamp; and would wonder who else was on the road, hoping it would be her mother, who sometimes rode out to meet her part of the way. When she heard her mother’s voice call out, “Joanna, is it you?” there was, at those moments nothing so comforting as her mother’s presence, a presence that spelled home on her journey.

The metaphor of a “journey” for our life with Christ resonates with many. Understanding God’s loving presence as a light, a voice, and a traveling companion offers us strength and comfort.

As I continue my faith journey, there have been headlights and voices along the way that have guided me home on cold, dark evenings. Some of those voices over the years have been close friends and family. Some of them have been theologians and authors who help me see my life and God’s word in new and enlightening ways: Henri Nouwen, Jack Rogers, Judith Viorst, and Joan Chittister, to name a few.

In her book, [The Ten Commandments](#), Joan Chittister sheds light on Jeremiah’s new covenant. She maintains that the Ten Commandments, when written on our hearts, can be traveling companions on our journeys; principles meant to shape a way of living, a lifestyle, an attitude of mind, a spirit of community, a people of God. Laws written upon our hearts lead to the fullness of life, not simply to a well-ordered life. They speak to our heart and become the spiritual ground on which our lives rest. They are the headlights that lead the way, the voice calling out our name in the darkness. They become the path we walk or ride on the journey toward wholeness, keeping our relationships honest, healthy, functioning, and accountable.

According to Joan Chittister, *the awareness that God is, and that we are accountable to God, is the soul’s greatest defense against arrogance and the oppression of others. It is not possible to really believe in the God of all and do evil to the other.*

The radical nature of this new covenant with God's laws written on each heart evolved during the exile on the Israelites journey. As important as priest, prophet, and king were to Israel, God's people learned to survive without the institutions of Jerusalem in Babylon. Light grew out of a time of darkness with a glowing inclusivity not known before. The good news of the new covenant is that God is now equally present to all Israelites from the greatest to the least. As God writes the law upon their hearts, the captive Israelites begin to write the oral tradition of the Torah on papyrus paper, which will nourish people's faith for millennia to come. Most biblical scholars believe the Books of the Torah were written and compiled during the Babylonian exile.

As we grow on our journey toward maturity, every stage of life teaches us something new. Every experience adds to the depth of our insight. Every situation demands a new dimension within us. At every juncture we are deeper, wiser people. The journey we each travel covers a lifetime of learning and maturing with opportunities at every juncture to write God's laws on our hearts, experiencing God within us rather than outside us.

Joan Chittister contends: As long as we think of God as only outside of ourselves rather than within us as well, we will never really be sure that God is the very air we breathe, the very heartbeat on which we are carried. When we know that God is all that keeps us alive, then we know God. For truly, "The finding of God is the coming to one's own self."

The laws of the heart are meant to lead us home, not only to our God but to ourselves as well. The laws of the heart give us balance, offer us hope, and remind us that the God who visited us in Christ, the God who conquered death on a cross, and the God who is our traveling companion is also the God who is there at the end of the journey, waiting with a headlamp, calling out our name, and bringing us home!

What a joy it is to welcome new members today. Know that we honor each of your faith journeys with Christ which have led you to this juncture and we anticipate our shared journey with imprinted hearts, shining light, and great joy. May the Lord keep our going out and our coming in from this time on and forevermore. Amen.