



Liturgical Day: The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Date: March 29, 2009

Sermon Title: Heartfelt Faithfulness

The days are coming,
A new covenant with God,
Written on the heart.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How has the season of Lent gone for you so far? 27 days ago (not counting Sundays) we began this journey on Ash Wednesday. We remembered our humanness – our brokenness – and we committed ourselves to 40 days (not counting Sundays) of self-reflection, spiritual discipline, and seeking God's grace. So how has it gone so far? What have you noticed about yourself or your faith? How has God changed you?

If you are anything like me, I'm sure your answers to these questions are mixed. There are times when we've stayed true to our Lenten commitments, and there are times when we've become distracted. After all, we are human, and any effort to open ourselves up to positive change is bound to be less than completely effective. And to be sure, we would be naïve to imagine that God will put in place all the change our lives need in any one 40-day (not counting Sundays) period of time.

That said, Lent is still about change. It is a time of seeking change in our lives. We desire to become more aware of our sin and more grateful for God's grace – in other words, to change our perceptions of how God is blessing us. We desire to be less sinful and more faithful – in other words, to change our behavior patterns. We desire to be less selfish and more generous – in other words, to change how we relate to others. We desire to be less frantic and more peaceful – in other words, to be more attentive to the life Christ offers to us. These are the kinds of changes that lie at the heart of the season of Lent – changes that God wants to make in our lives.

Now, most of us have been around for a few years, and the patterns of our lives are pretty well established, so these changes don't come easily. (You've heard the old joke, haven't you? Question: "How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: "Change?") Even when our intentions are good and honorable, the darker side of our human nature fights us. But maybe that is why the church invites us into Lent every year, not just once or twice in our lives. Maybe it is so that we have an annual time of reminding ourselves how important this is. So how has the season of Lent gone for you so far? What kinds of changes is God making in your lives?

Those are the kinds of questions that lie at the heart of this season we call Lent. They are also the kinds of questions that lie at the heart of Jeremiah's ministry.

Jeremiah lived some 600 years before Christ was born. He was a citizen of Judah. In his younger years, he was taught about the days when Israel, the northern kingdom, refused to change and become more faithful to God. In 721 BC, they were carried off into captivity by the Assyrians, and the people of Jeremiah's day were left to assume that happened because Israel had been unfaithful, and God's protective hand had been withdrawn.

FIRST LESSON

JEREMIAH 31:31-34

PSALM

PSALM 51:1-12

OR

PSALM 119:9-16

SECOND LESSON

HEBREWS 5:5-10

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 12:20-33

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O GOD, WITH STEADFAST
LOVE YOU DRAW US TO
YOURSELF, AND IN MERCY
YOU RECEIVE OUR PRAYERS.
STRENGTHEN US TO BRING
FORTH THE FRUITS OF THE
SPIRIT, THAT THROUGH LIFE
AND DEATH WE MAY LIVE IN
YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST,
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD,
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH
YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT,
ONE GOD, NOW AND
FOREVER. AMEN.

9300 E. BELLEVIEW AVE.
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,
COLORADO 80111

VOICE

(303) 770-9300

FAX

(303) 770-9301

WEB

WWW.STPLC.ORG



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

During the first part of his ministry, Jeremiah was a thorn in the side to the leaders of Judah, the southern kingdom of God's people. He warned them over and over again that unless they changed their ways – unless they began to govern in ways that were pleasing to God, then they would meet the same destruction that their northern neighbor met a generation or so earlier. But the leaders of Judah refused to listen to Jeremiah. They continued to be more interested in power than in justice; more interested in profit than in generosity; more interested in themselves than in God. And so, in time, the Babylonian armies swarmed into the southern kingdom, and the leaders of God's people were carried off by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC., including the prophet Ezekiel.

During this time of exile, Jeremiah stayed behind with the remnant of God's people. He was recently referred to here at Saint Peter as the "doom and gloom" prophet – but others have called him the weeping prophet, because during these days of his life, he looked around at what was left of the Holy Land and wept. He wept for its destruction. He wept for the faithlessness of its leaders. He wept for the promises God gave to Abraham, which now, surely, were in jeopardy.

Yet at the same time, even though there was no earthly reason for it, he remained hopeful. He comforted God's people, reminding them of God's love and grace, and assuring them that God had not forgotten them. His words are gathered into what some Biblical scholars call a "Book of Comfort" – Jeremiah, chapters 30-33 – and this morning's first lesson is taken from that section. Jeremiah says,

*The days are surely coming when God will make a new covenant
God says: "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...
I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."*

God's plans are to make profound changes in the sacred relationship that had been established with Israel. No longer will that relationship be based on Israel's ability to follow the law. No longer will that relationship be based on the system of sacrifice. It will be based on God's gift of forgiveness. The people's faithfulness will be shaped by the law of God that is written on their hearts. From the very center of who they are, they will live with love and kindness and compassion and justice and righteousness. Not because some external set of rules and regulations forced them to do so, but because the leanings of their heart caused them to move in that direction.

What Jeremiah describes here, is a people who are so powerfully affected by God's gifts, that it completely transforms the way they live. Transformed not from the outside in, but from the inside out. Transformed not by their desire to obtain some favor from God, but by their experience of God's goodness. Transformed in a way that made all the difference in their lives.

During Lent, one of our intentions is to live into our belief that this is the kind of transformation that we experience through faith in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we too receive the promise of God's unconditional forgiveness. In Christ, we too come to know God, and come to know God's ways. In Christ, we too are given the model of what it looks like when one truly has the ways of God written on his heart. In Christ, we too are freed from trying to please God so that we can live our lives in ways that are pleasing to God. Not compelled by external force, but transformed from the inside by God's love. This is the kind of effect that Christian faith can have. It makes a tremendous difference in the here-and-now.

A few years ago, a friend of mine asked me a disturbing, yet profound question. He said: "If there was no heaven or hell, will your ministry have been a waste of time?" I was floored by his question. First of all, it caused me to wonder if he suspected there wasn't a heaven or a hell. But once I moved past the shock of that question, it caused me to think much more clearly about the current impact that Christian faith has on a believer's life. Sure, we are promised the gift of heaven. And certainly, we are able to live life and approach death with much more hope and peace when we embrace that promise. But the life of Christian faithfulness is so much more than that.

God wants to make a difference in our lives right now. God wants us to know what it means to be captured by grace and love. God wants us to be a blessing to those who surround us. God wants us to take

delight in those things that are pleasing to God. God wants us to know that a life lived in this manner, is a much richer – a much more deeply blessed – kind of life.

That was the purpose of Jeremiah's ministry. That was the intent of God's transforming grace in Christ. That is the gift that lies at the heart of the Lenten season. And that is what we pray for one another this morning: that God's grace might transform our lives; that we might personally come to know God; that God's law might be written on our hearts;

So how is your Lent going this year? I pray that you have been inspired by the gift of God's grace, empowered by the presence of Christ in your lives, and transformed by the depths of God's love. Maybe this season of Lent can be for each of us a new beginning in opening up our hearts and lives to the kinds of changes that God would make in us.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (March 29, 2009)

First Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

^{31:31-34} 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. ³² 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. ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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 ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; English Text:

^{12:20} Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱ Jeremiah 31:31-34, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 12:20-33, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{12:20} Ἦσαν δὲ Ἕλληνες τινες ἐκ τῶν ἀναβαινόντων ἵνα προσκυνήσωσιν ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ· ²¹οὗτοι οὖν προσήλθον Φιλίππῳ τῷ ἀπὸ Βηθσαϊδᾶ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ ἠρώτων αὐτὸν λέγοντες· κύριε, θέλομεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἰδεῖν. ²²ἔρχεται ὁ Φίλιππος καὶ λέγει τῷ Ἀνδρέᾳ, ἔρχεται Ἀνδρέας καὶ Φίλιππος καὶ λέγουσιν τῷ Ἰησοῦ. ²³ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἀποκρίνεται αὐτοῖς λέγων· ἐλήλυθεν ἡ ὥρα ἵνα δοξασθῇ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. ²⁴ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ὁ κόκκος τοῦ σίτου πεσὼν εἰς τὴν γῆν ἀποθάνῃ, αὐτὸς μόνος μένει· ἐὰν δὲ ἀποθάνῃ, πολὺν καρπὸν φέρει. ²⁵ὁ φιλῶν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἀπολλύει αὐτήν, καὶ ὁ μισῶν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ τούτῳ εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον φυλάξει αὐτήν. ²⁶ἐὰν ἐμοί τις διακονῇ, ἐμοὶ ἀκολουθείτω, καὶ ὅπου εἰμὶ ἐγὼ ἐκεῖ καὶ ὁ διάκονος ὁ ἐμὸς ἔσται· ἐὰν τις ἐμοὶ διακονῇ τιμήσει αὐτὸν ὁ πατήρ.

²⁷Νῦν ἡ ψυχὴ μου τετάρακται, καὶ τί εἶπω; πάτερ, σῶσον με ἐκ τῆς ὥρας ταύτης; ἀλλὰ διὰ τοῦτο ἦλθον εἰς τὴν ὥραν ταύτην. ²⁸πάτερ, δόξασον σου τὸ ὄνομα. ἦλθεν οὖν φωνὴ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ· καὶ ἐδόξασα καὶ πάλιν δοξάσω. ²⁹ὁ οὖν ὄχλος ὁ ἐστὼς καὶ ἀκούσας ἔλεγεν βροντὴν γεγονέναι, ἄλλοι ἔλεγον· ἄγγελος αὐτῷ λελάληκεν. ³⁰ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν· οὐ δι' ἐμέ ἡ φωνὴ αὕτη γέγονεν ἀλλὰ δι' ὑμᾶς. ³¹νῦν κρίσις ἐστὶν τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, νῦν ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἐκβληθήσεται ἔξω. ³²καγὼ ἐὰν ὑψωθῶ ἐκ τῆς γῆς, πάντας ἐλκύσω πρὸς ἐμαυτόν. ³³τοῦτο δὲ ἔλεγεν σημαίνων ποίῳ θανάτῳ ἤμελλεν ἀποθνήσκειν. ^{iv}

^{iv} St. John 12:20-33, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).