

## ***THE HEART BREAKS AND GOD'S WORD FALLS IN***

In our Hebrew Bible text today people are forgetting again how to live in loving relationship with one another – forgetting God's promises. But God remembers – God recalls the history of the people better than they remember it themselves.

God considers the promise of the rainbow – a promise to take care of the earth and all living things – a promise to be with the people always. God remembers the promise of the stars – a promise made to Abraham and Sarah long ago – a promise that they would begin a huge family – as many as all the stars in the sky. God remembers this promise that the family could become people of God and that each one would be known by name. God brings to mind the promise of stone tablets – a promise to give the people loving ways to live. God remembers the promise of the snake – a promise that we read last week – a promise that God would always be with the people – in new times, in lonely times, in scary times.

God remembers these promises because God makes and keeps them. But God is concerned about the forgetfulness and sin of the people and God decides that it is time to give the people another promise. God knows that people need divine love and help so God speaks to the people through the prophet Jeremiah – promises that they will come to know God so well that they will never forget again. God promises to put on their hearts that which helps them to know how God wants each person to be in relationship with others. God will write divine words on their hearts.

The Psalmist asks that God create a clean heart within – a divine new heart so that God's ways will be deeply and permanently embedded. There is also a Hasidic tale about this...

*A disciple asks the rabbi, 'Why does the Torah tell us to "place these words upon your hearts"? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words **in** our hearts?'*

*The rabbi answers, 'It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay, until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.'*

God's heart is broken because of the forgetfulness of the people and in that heartbreak we find compassion and grace. God's new covenant is rooted in the overriding reality of forgiveness – forgiveness overcomes sin. The covenant is a promise in the future that God is creating in which the people's sin will be remembered no more – a future promise that begins when it is heard and believed.

God's way is full of promise yet we, like the exiles of old, sometimes doubt the capacity of God to work something new against all the circumstances we see around

us. Can there really be any newness that will overcome the evil situations of today? Have we lost the very possibility of promise?

Maybe the Greeks that come seeking Jesus in the passage from John's gospel that Margaret read are wondering if there is anything that will overcome the troubles of their day. Perhaps they are looking for the possibility of promise that Jesus represents. They come to Philip and say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Whoever they are – whatever their ultimate goal – they had heard of Jesus and want to meet him.

I suppose that hardly makes them unique – Jesus was rumored to have recently raised a man named Lazarus from the dead. The man had been moldering in a tomb for four days already when this rabbi from Nazareth reportedly called him out of that grave. And so these Greek strangers come knowing that they simply must see the man who could do what Jesus recently did.

They make their request to Philip, who in turn pulls his brother Andrew into the action as well. The two of them go to Jesus and ask him, "Lord, do you have a minute? Some Greek tourists want your autograph or something." But it is just here where the story makes an odd turn. Jesus goes off into a meditative comment about seeds and plants, about life and death, about servants and masters. There is no indication that Jesus paid much attention to Philip or Andrew; no indication he ever meets the very people who first said, "Sir, we would see Jesus." In fact, there is a quirky irony that in verse 21 there is a request to see Jesus and yet in verse 36, just beyond the end of our reading for today, we are told that Jesus hid himself from those Greeks and everyone else. In John's gospel Jesus does not appear in public again until he does so nailed to a cross.

Why doesn't Jesus seem to answer and why does he hide? Jesus hides because "the hour has come" – the time to see him has come and gone. Now is the time for him to be "hidden" in death – to be hidden as a seed that is buried in the ground is hidden. He says it is time to die, time to go the way of a kernel of wheat so that greater fruitfulness can be generated.

His answer is that they will see him – be drawn to him – when he is *lifted up from the earth*. Through his sacrifice, like a seed planted to grow and bring forth much fruit, a new relationship with God will be established. His crucifixion will become God's way of drawing the whole world into this new relationship – giving eternal life to all who believe. This whole passage focuses on the meaning and cost of discipleship. Without ever naming the crucifixion, it holds up the cross as the symbol of the sacrifice that discipleship entails.

*One day, the heart breaks and God's words fall in.* Though heartbreak, we find compassion and grace. The cross can be seen as God's heart broken for the sake of humankind – broken open into a love that Christ's followers are called to emulate.

Jesus' words about the grain of wheat dying in order to bear fruit seem to point to our need to have our hearts broken open in order for us to bear fruit.

I know it is a paradox – an apparent contradiction: bestow to retain, lose to find, die to live, give to get. But think of the mystic poet who asked, “What is the cure for love? More love.” The formula holds true in other circumstances as well: the cure for mystery? More mystery. – the cure for paradox? More paradox. Last week’s readings from Numbers and the gospel of John reminded us that the cure for snakebite lay in looking upon a serpent. And in such a way the season of Lent beckons us to consider that we find our cure not by shrinking from what besets and befuddles and daunts us but by looking deeper into those very places, and finding the treasure that God has placed within them.

The whole point of our Lenten season of repentance is that we have to be willing to let go of something in order to live into the power of God within. We have to be willing to relinquish our hold on “stuff” that we value but that stands between us and God. What needs to die so we can hear God’s words as individual believers, as a church and as a society?

Go into the things you shrink from – go into the questions, the mysteries, the paradoxes, the seeming contradictions. Go into the Lenten dying that is not dying after all. We work so very hard at letting go, sometimes, trying to train ourselves to release our grip on all that is not God. But what if it is not about giving up but giving in? Falling into dirt, as Jesus says here: going where grain is supposed to go. Following the spiral within the seed that takes us deeper into the dark but also – finally, fruitfully – out of it.



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