

Scripture Readings and Sermon

March 21, 2021 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

Chapters 30 and 31 of Jeremiah are often called "The Book of Consolation" for they stand out as a glimmer of hope in the middle of the Lord's messages of judgment. At the prospect of exile with no more temple because of the siege and fall of Jerusalem, how were the people to maintain the sacrificial system of the Sinai covenant which is connected with the "promised land"? First, the Lord promises that future generations will no longer have to pay for the sins of their ancestors. Each generation will be accountable for their sins but their children shall be declared innocent (27-30). The second promise is related to the first. The Law will no longer be based on a centralized temple sacrificial system and orthodox teachings from a centralized institution but will be based on a new covenant written on the heart. The heart becomes the temple and the teacher is God. Righteousness will no longer be based on following tradition but will rather be based on following the covenant that God writes on the heart. Salvation has moved from a birth right to a personal relationship with the Lord. This new individualized covenant gave hope to a people who were facing the prospect of exile.

Jeremiah 31:33 "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts"

What does it mean to have the law in your heart?

If your actions don't match your faith, is your heart divided?

Is your heart hardened by traditions and old habits?

How do you soften your heart to receive God's teaching?

Where is God rewriting your life today?

Commentary on John 12:20-33 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

Just as John does not include the scene with Jesus blessing the bread and wine, John also does not have the scene at Gethsemane. Instead, this passage asks the question "what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'?" which is what is recorded in Mark 14:35 at Gethsemane. After Jesus has prayed at Gethsemane, all three synoptic Gospels record Jesus as saying "the hour has come" which John places in 12:23. What brings about "the hour" in the other Gospels is Jesus arrest, where as in John it is the arrival of the Greek believers. For John, it is when Jesus has gathered the world to him that the hour has come. Jesus then talks about the necessity of his death so that the Father may be glorified. It is at this point that the voice of God is heard in John. It is interesting to note that John does not include the voice in his baptism story nor does he even have the story of the transfiguration both of which times the other Gospels have God speaking. For John, the voice is not affirming Jesus' identity as much as it is affirming Jesus' mission to the cross. Jesus is the Lamb of God who must die so that others may live.

John 12:24 "but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

How does the image of a grain fit with John's understanding of Jesus?

Could the shell represent the humanity that wraps Jesus' divinity?

If the shell is broken, is that when the true light of the Word finally seen?

If the Holy Spirit dwells in you, is your 'shell' hiding that spirit?

What does it mean to loss your life (shell) in order to save it (kernel)?

How is God calling you to break out of your shell?

Commentary on Hebrews 5:5-10 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

The "Order of Melchizedek" first appears in the story of Abram rescuing his nephew Lot from

Chedorlaomer (Genesis 14:14-17). Abram encounters the first person beyond himself who knows of God. "And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him one tenth of everything." (Genesis 14:18-20) The only other time the "Order of Melchizedek" is mentioned is in Psalm 110:4 which is quoted in the Hebrews text (Hebrews 5:6). Psalm 110 begins by saying "The LORD says to my lord" which Jesus uses to respond to Pharisees in Matthew 22:42-45 when he is asked about the Messiah. Hebrews uses both of these texts with the image of the bread and wine (communion) and the LORD of my lord (Christ) to show how Jesus is the obedient son and high priest appointed by God.

Hebrews 5:8 "he learned obedience through what he suffered"

When has suffering brought you to your proverbial knees?

On who or what did you lean on for support?

Did they or it provide the support you needed?

If they did, did that grow your faith in them and strengthen your relationship?

Can obedience be another way to view as an expression of a deep faith in someone?

Sermon "Facing Our Doubts" (*Sermon Video*)

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus preached "Repent, believe, the Kingdom of God is at hand". That night in Jerusalem, Nicodemus wanted to know how we get to the Kingdom of God. This seems like a common question, "How do I get to heaven". Jesus, however, saw the Kingdom of God not as some future promise but a present reality for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. The question was not about getting to a place but waking up to where you are already at now. A baby is already in the world before it is born. It is simply unaware because it is encased in the mother's womb. In order to become aware of its surroundings, a baby must be born and so we also must be born again, born from above. We must leave the darkness and enveloping comfort of the womb to enter the light and endless possibilities of the Kingdom of God. As Jesus tells Peter when Peter proclaims Jesus is the Messiah, this is a gift of the Father, a revelation of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit removes our blindness if we have faith.

Those last words, "if we have faith", is the focus of these readings during this season of Lent. Paul tells us in Ephesians that it is not by any work that we are born again but by faith. Rather than resisting the contractions of grace, we must have faith that God is doing a new thing and that it will be good. For it is by faith through grace that we are born again and that same grace will enable us to grow in Christ if we continue to have faith. In what or who are we to have faith? Our institutions and our families? In ourselves and our God given talents? There is surely enough low self-esteem in this world to make children of God feel less than who they were created to be. We do need to faith that we are children of God, gifted for God's kingdom but we first must have faith in the Giver of the gifts.

Faced with the long road to the promised land, after forty years the Israelites still complained and had doubts. They were so close to the end but Moses was taking a detour and they complained bitterly enough that the LORD sent serpents as punishment. These serpents were physical representations of their fears and doubts. When they pleaded to remove the serpents, they were in essence begging for faith. Faith in a God who was and is always present but often unseen. They knew they need faith but were too afraid to leave the darkness of their doubts and fears. The sad truth is that they were already in the promised land even in the desert. Where ever God is with us, there is the promised land, the Kingdom of God. They need to face their fears and their doubts. They needed to look upon the serpents and choose God above all. And so made a bronze serpent and placed it upon a pole.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order for the Holy Spirit to enter our lives so that we may be born

again, we need to believe. We need to believe that God is with us and that there is more to life than what we see in the dark. We need to believe that the promises made in the scriptures are being fulfilled. We need to believe that Jesus is telling us the truth. In fact, we need to go beyond that and believe that Jesus is the Son of Man even if he is crucified on a cross. If we face the sin of our doubts and fears and choose to accept by faith Jesus, then we will become open to the Holy Spirit. If we believe, we will discover that the Kingdom of God is at hand. We must first, however, turn from the darkness and choose the light. The gift of free will given by grace enables us to choose the light or the dark. Repentance is always our choice made possible by God's grace. It is the only act required for it is through repentance that faith is expressed. The question of Lent is the question given to all God's children stuck in the darkness of wrath. Will you repent? The offer has been made. The invitation has been sent. The price has been paid. All that is required is repent and believe for the Kingdom of God is at hand.