

A Fresh New Start

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 18:1-8

October 16, 2016 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Every now and then, God gives a new beginning; a fresh new start. Looking back in history, you could call the Protestant Reformation a fresh new start for a tired old church. The founding of our nation was a new beginning, a fresh new start, an experiment that people could rule themselves in a democratic republic. Since then, millions of refugees, including our own ancestors, have come for a new beginning; a fresh new start. For those who came as slaves, against their wills, the abolition of slavery as a result of the Civil War was a new beginning, a fresh new start. You could say that every graduation, every marriage, every new child born, every new career is a new beginning, a fresh new start.

The words we heard from the prophet Jeremiah speak of a new beginning; a fresh new start. Jeremiah's contemporaries, those who were faithful to God, remembered way back to the covenant of Noah; after the floodwaters had dried up came a new beginning, a fresh new start. They remembered way back to the covenant of Abraham, with God's promise that his and Sarah's descendants would outnumber the grains of sand on the seashore; a new beginning, a fresh new start. They remembered the covenant of Moses, after they were freed from slavery in Egypt, and before they entered the Promised Land; a new beginning, a fresh new start. In that covenant, God had promised to bless them with peace and abundance if they would remain faithful to him; but God threatened them that if they fell away, if they treated the poor unjustly, if they worshiped other gods, God's blessing would be replaced by a curse. They would lose their peace. They would lose their freedom. They would lose their abundance.

Now, in the time of Jeremiah, the people of Judah were on the verge of losing all their freedom; all their peace; all their abundance. A few decades before, the Assyrian Empire had conquered and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, but Judah had escaped with their freedom intact. The conventional wisdom was that Israel had been unfaithful to God, had worshiped idols, so God had let them be destroyed; but God had preserved faithful Judah. But Judah wasn't so faithful, either. Now the Babylonians were on their doorstep. The mighty armies of the Babylonian Empire, with their symbol of the lion, were drawing near the gates of Jerusalem. Already, the government of Judah had to pay heavy tribute to the Babylonians. The people muttered to themselves. "God is punishing us for our parents and our grandparents' sins. They were unfaithful and now we're bearing God's curse." They remembered a proverb. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and their children's teeth were set on edge." Because of the sins of their

ancestors, God was leaving them high and dry as the Babylonian army marched on the city.

Before this time of pessimism and despair, when things were going well, Jeremiah had been called the weeping prophet. He had seen it coming. Jeremiah had said that if they didn't straighten out, God would abandon them to their fate. They had laughed at Jeremiah. They had ignored Jeremiah. They had told Jeremiah to shut up. They had threatened Jeremiah. But Jeremiah had continued to warn them of the doom to come.

Now that doom was at their doorstep, Jeremiah was changing his tune. Sure, tough times were ahead. Defeat would come. Exile would come. Yet God wasn't through with them. This time of exile to come would allow God to work within and among them to bring a new life to the community. The exile wouldn't be forever. God offered hope. So Jeremiah quoted that old proverb about the parents eating sour grapes and the children's teeth being set on edge, and said that they didn't have to worry about paying for their parents' sins, they needed to take responsibility for their own. Once they did that, God would bring forgiveness and hope. "In those days," he said, "people will no longer say: Sour grapes eaten by parents

leave a bitter taste in the mouths of their children.

Because everyone will die for their own sins:

whoever eats sour grapes

will have a bitter taste in their own mouths." (Jeremiah 31:29-30)

Judgment was upon them, sure. But hope was coming through judgement. Jeremiah announced the coming of a new covenant, one that would be written on their hearts. In other words, it would be a covenant between believers and their God, a covenant that would be a part of the believers' DNA. The old covenant had been ignored by the people; but God was willing to offer a new one, a covenant not just of external rules, one that was rooted in love.

When that new covenant was written, then God promised through Jeremiah that "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (v. 33)—which is exactly the same promise that God had made before. Then he adds to it a beautiful promise. "They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "Know the Lord!" because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins." (v. 34) Isn't that wonderful, God, who remembers everything, would no longer remember their sins and hold them against them—God would wipe clean the slate. And the people, who had forgotten God, would now know God—from the pillars of society down to the humblest child.

God through Jeremiah was offering hope—a new vision; a new relationship; a new covenant. In many ways, the exile generation did revitalize and renew Judaism. Instead of abandoning their religious identity as the Israelites had after they were conquered, the Judeans, their temple destroyed, became a people of the book. They held tight to their faith identity and would carry it with them when they came home.

We Christians believe that this prophecy of Jeremiah came true in its highest and deepest way in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We, not just the Jewish people, but all humanity, were included in the new identity, the new covenant, the new relationship that God had offered. God has engraved a new covenant in our hearts. We, who once did not know God, now know and love God. God, through Jesus Christ, has widened the family circle. You all know the two main divisions of the Christian Bible, right? Old Testament and New Testament? Go back to some of the older KJV Bibles and you'll find them called the Old Covenant and the New Covenant—different words, same idea. The Old Covenant isn't done away with, but the New Covenant expands God's grace in a whole new way.

This is why, when Jesus gathered with his disciples for the last time, it was at a Passover Meal. The Passover meal celebrated the rescue of the Jewish slaves from Egypt; the beginning of a journey that would establish the covenant of the law through Moses. Each part of that meal would symbolize parts of that story of Exodus. Jesus and the disciples, good Jews, affirmed that covenant. But when the meal was over, Jesus broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples, and gave the bread a new meaning, a new identity. "This bread is my body, broken for you. Eat this bread and remember me." Then he took the wine, poured it, and blessed it, and said, "This is the blood of the new covenant, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink it and remember me." And the wine took on a new meaning, a new identity. A new covenant was sealed. That new identity, that new relationship with God, that new covenant is something that we celebrate each Sunday when we gather around the table of the Lord.

God is always there to give us a second chance. God is always there to give us a fresh new start. There come times when our faith seems to be dried out, when we feel that we are just going through the motions, when we don't feel close to God anymore. It happened to Mother Theresa, it can happen to us. But that covenant, that relationship of love, that grace that was given to us at birth and sealed at our baptism, is written on our hearts. God is never far away.

We are a church of new beginnings, a church of fresh starts. The Disciples of Christ began as a new thing in North America, a church without ties to Europe or England, that would try to restore a more primitive Christianity, centered not in creeds but in the scripture itself. We were a movement for

unity in a divided land. Crossroads Christian Church is a church of new beginnings, a new creation, formed when two congregations realized that they could create something new, and become revitalized. As your interim minister, I'm something like a doula or midwife, helping you move toward a new beginning, a fresh new start, under a new pastor.

As a church and as individual Christians, God offers us fresh new starts; new birth; new beginnings. Out of death, God brings new life. So let's not be afraid to trust and follow the God of new beginnings into a new future. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon