

**Lent 5 / March 17, 2024**

**Jeremiah 31:31;34**

**“Behold, the days are coming declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sins no more.”**

**I will forgive their sin and remember it no more**

The Lord made covenant with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai when He brought them out of the house of bondage in Egypt and through the waters of the Red Sea. In the covenant the Lord made Israel His people and Himself their God. The first term of the covenant, foundational for their relationship, was the command, “You shall have no other gods before me.” The Lord promised Israel to be their God. Israel promised to be His people. More than a contractual agreement, the covenant was likened to a marriage relationship, in which the Lord was Israel’s husband and Israel was His bride. The Lord was unique from the gods of the ancient near east in many ways, one of which was that He had no female deity as a spouse. Israel was His bride. He was Israel’s husband. More than a religion, the covenant between Israel and the Lord was a deep spiritual relationship, a marriage.

As in a human marriage, faithfulness was of paramount importance.

The Lord would be faithful by protecting Israel from her enemies, who were many and powerful. The Lord would be faithful by providing Israel with the resources to sustain their physical well being. Rain in season. A bountiful harvest. As the Psalmist sang, wine to gladden their hearts, oil to make their faces shine, bread to strengthen their bodies. Israel would be faithful by keeping the terms of the covenant in the commandments, chief of which was “You shall have no other gods before me.” Secondly, but of no less importance, was loving one another by treating each other with dignity and respect. The terms of the covenant relationship were summarized in the words, “You shall love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself.”

Love was essence of the covenant and of the Lord’s relationship with Israel His people. Forgiveness is the essence of love. Love and forgiveness were the essence of the Lord’s relationship with His ancient people and are the essence of His relationship with people today. God promised Israel a new covenant in place of the one they broke, when they broke their marriage relationship with Him. God fulfilled His promise in Christ Jesus through whom He made a new covenant between Himself, the descendants of ancient Israel and with all people. In Christ Jesus, God fulfills His promise to forgive our sin and to remember it no more.

In Deuteronomy the second generation of Israel reaffirmed their covenant relationship with the Lord, when they prepared to cross the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land. The Lord promised to bless them with entry into and life in the former Land of Canaan. They would bless the Lord by keeping the covenant in their worship of the Lord and in their relationships with each other. In Deuteronomy, Moses said, “Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.” The people affirmed their understanding and their desire to be faithful in relationship with the Lord, saying, “Amen.” By disobeying the commandments of the Lord, Israel was breaking the covenant agreement, violating their relationship with the Lord and bringing the curses upon themselves.

Do you always keep your promises? Unlike us, who often fail even when we have the best of intentions, the Lord always keeps His promises. He is the faithful God. In Deuteronomy the Lord said, “Know that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations.” God is faithful to keep His promises, we not as much. Sometimes Israel turned away from God intentionally, running after the gods and goddesses of their pagan neighbours. Sometimes, less intentionally, because of the weakness of their sinful nature. Even those who set their hearts on loving God fall and fail many times each day. God knows our spiritual condition. He knows our weakness and proneness to sin. He knows in love. He blessed Israel with forgiveness through the sacrifices provided in the covenant. God provides us and all people with forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ in the covenant He made new in Him. In Christ, the Lord promises to forgive our iniquity and to remember our sins no more.

The covenant at Mount Sinai was sealed in the blood of bulls sacrificed by Moses. This signified the new relationship between the Lord and Israel. Israel agreed to the terms of the covenant saying, “All the words the Lord has spoken we will do.” Moses then hurled the blood upon the assembled people. A messy, but graphic illustration of the seriousness of the relationship they were entering into. Not easily forgotten. By agreeing to the terms of the covenant and being baptized in the blood of the bulls, Israel entered into relationship with the Lord as His spouse. The Lord promised His faithfulness. Israel promised their faithfulness.

However, as soon as Moses and the Lord were out of sight, Israel quickly broke the covenant, fashioning an idol and worshipping it as their god. It was a pattern that was repeated again and again, time after time. Great is Thy faithfulness. Great is our unfaithfulness. However, despite Israel's disobedience, unfaithfulness and violation of the covenant, the Lord remained faithful. He called Israel to repentance through His prophets. He offered Israel forgiveness through the sacrifices of the priests in the temple. He gave them His royal law to guide them in the path of righteousness. They were unfaithful, but the Lord remained faithful to love and forgive.

God is faithful, but there is only so much unfaithfulness that a relationship can bear before it comes to an end. Unfaithfulness is the cause of the ending of many human relationships; marriages, friendships and family relationships. Unfaithfulness destroys relationships. Unfaithfulness destroyed many in Israel as they turned away from God. At times God could no longer bear Israel's unfaithfulness. He turned from Israel and took away His blessings and His protection. He separated from, but never divorced His people. He was hurt and angry, but never completely took away His steadfast love and faithfulness.

Israel had broken His covenant at the time of Jeremiah. They would be exiled from the Promised Land in accordance with the terms of the Covenant of Mount Sinai. The Babylonians would take them into captivity. But instead of divorcing them as an unfaithful spouse, The Lord promised to make a new covenant. He promised to marry them again in faithfulness and to join many peoples to them. He would make a new covenant, not based on Israel's promise of faithfulness, but based entirely on His promise to forgive their sins and remember their iniquity no more. God fulfilled this promise in giving His Son Jesus to make a new covenant. He took our place in pledging faithfulness. He bore the curse of our unfaithfulness on the cross. In Him, God forgives our sins and remembers our iniquities no more.

God made the new covenant between Himself, the house of Israel and all people through the mediation of Jesus, His Son begotten from eternity, clothed in flesh in time. Instead of becoming more distant because of our sin, the Lord drew closer to us and to all people. He gave His Son to share our humanity and join us in life in bondage to sin, subject to the temptation of the devil and under the condemnation of death. Jesus made a new covenant, different from the old, in that it is not based on our promise of faithfulness, but on His promise of faithfulness on our behalf. Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. He took our place in suffering the consequences of disobedience, which Israel acknowledged in the first covenant. He bore our sin and offered His faithfulness in place of our unfaithfulness. He is the mediator of a better covenant, because He sealed it in His own blood and guarantees it for all who believe through His resurrection.

Jesus made a new covenant, not through the sacrifice of an animal or the shedding of a bull's blood. He made covenant through the sacrifice of His body and the shedding of His blood on the cross. We receive entry into this covenant through baptism with water and the Spirit. In baptism we receive the spiritual covering of His blood. His Holy Spirit to dwell within us. A share in His death to sin and resurrection to newness of life. We receive the promise of sharing His physical resurrection to a new and eternal life. We receive the benefits of the new covenant in the words of absolution, the promise of forgiveness in Jesus' Name. We receive the blessing of the new covenant in the sacrament of Christ's holy body and precious blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sin. In these, God promises to forgive our sins and to remember them no more.

Jeremiah sang, "Behold, the days are coming." In Christ the day has come. Jesus shed His blood to seal the covenant of forgiveness. He extends the invitation to enter this covenant relationship in which He is the groom and the church is the bride, through faith in His name and baptism into His death resurrection. He draws near to us through the fellowship of the faithful. He is among us through word and sacrament. He draws us near to Himself by His Spirit to live with Him in faith and faithfulness. For His sake God forgives our sins and remembers them no more.

The Lord, open our hearts by His Spirit to receive Jesus as He comes to us in marks of the New Covenant; the word, the water, the bread and wine. In Jesus' Name. Amen