

What's "New" About the New Covenant
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 18, 2018

Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34 (ESV)

“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, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares 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. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Covenant language is very central to the message of the Bible. Today we are going to first review what a covenant is. Through His Word God teaches us that His covenant is always a covenant of grace to save sinners. The Bible talks about the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. What’s “new” about the New Covenant? How is our covenant God saving us from the condemnation we deserve because of our sins, and saving us to new life and even eternal life?

What is a covenant? First of all, God’s covenant of love with us is not like our contracts. In our contracts two parties come together, each bringing something of equal value to the agreement.

A covenant could be like that, but most Biblical covenants are agreements between one who has lots of power and resources and one who has much less. A stronger king and kingdom might enter into a covenant with a weaker king and kingdom to protect them. The smaller would make payments in some way for this privilege. Now if the smaller was invaded by an enemy, the stronger king would come and be an immediate resource of help to fight off any attackers. But, if the less powerful king and smaller kingdom should get uppity and rebel against the more powerful king, the more powerful had every right to come and squash any rebellion. That’s why they are usually called covenants of blood. We call these bi-lateral covenants—meaning each party brings something to the agreement.

Now here is the big difference between secular covenants and God’s covenants. God’s covenants are always uni-lateral. Unilateral means to be carried out by one party. God’s covenants with sinners are always unilateral. God brings everything to the table. God’s covenant is gracious; a relationship with God is never earned or deserved, never bargained or purchased. God is at work for sinners and all the sinners can do is say “Thank you!” in a way that is good and right. God’s covenants then are loving covenants—God loves sinners unconditionally, and we sinners in return will certainly love such a God.

God made a gracious covenant with a people He chose for Himself to carry out His promise of bringing His Savior for sinners into the world. God chose the children, or the descendants, of Israel to carry forward that promise. It was all God’s work—the children of Israel were slaves at the time! God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt in the Exodus.

God then formalized His covenant with His people at Mount Sinai. God said, **“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I ... brought you to Myself. Now therefore if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all peoples ... and you will be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”** (Ex. 19: 4-6). The people said, **“All that the Lord has spoken we will do”** (v. 8).

Then the Lord said, **“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”** Now, here’s what you will do: **“You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy. Honor your Father and your mother.”** All the commandments and laws God gave to Israel were to guide them in their life of saying thanks to their saving God.

The covenant laws were to be studied and learned by the Israelites so they would keep them. Inevitably, all of these laws showed the Israelites how sinful they were. The covenant laws were also designed, then, to drive them back to the LORD time and again with sacrifices. God knew that the Law would do that, so within the law He also provided with ways to relieve their guilt. God forgave their sins as they made specific sacrifices which always showed that sin requires a price, and every sacrifice was to remind the people of God’s Promised Savior who would once and for all deliver from sin and death.

The covenant was a relationship of love—God was like a husband to His people—loving, caring, providing, defending, nourishing. But the people often rebelled. They refused to live in loving faithfulness and obedience. They began to claim that God should love them and protect them no matter how they lived—that was not part of the covenant!

Amazingly, God was patient with them, merciful, slow to anger. God sent faithful prophets, priests, and kings to call the people back to the covenant relationship. That would last a while, but then the people quickly turned away from God to their own desires. Finally, God would send a foreign nation to conquer them and take them into exile.

The Lord promised to restore His people to the Promised Land after the exile. The exile would be temporary, for God Himself would save and return His people. God could destroy them because of their sin, but out of deep love and compassion He merely disciplined them with exile and even gave them the hope of return and a future as God’s people.

The old covenant was pointing ahead. "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." So, first of all, we see that some of God’s new covenant is a renewal of God’s way He has always worked. God’s new covenant, like the old, is very one-sided. God is still gracious and loving sinners with an unconditional love. The promise, the keeping of the promise, and the blessings all come from God and they are for all who were enslaved by their sins. We have not earned a bargaining chip to present before God to enter into covenant with Him. We have a natural hatred toward God because of our sinful nature. We cannot come to believe in God on our own.

God comes to us and the main reason the new covenant is new is that the old covenant focused attention on what was still to come. The old covenant was to help the believer look forward to the coming of the new covenant revealed in Jesus Christ.

In the old covenant there was sacrifice after sacrifice. They did not finally take away sin but only pointed ahead to the One who would eventually pay for the sins of the whole world. Jesus came as the perfect Lamb of God, to pay the perfect price, once and for all for all the sins of all. We discover God’s covenant is new and improved. The writer to the Hebrews took this promise from Jeremiah and proclaimed it is for us in Jesus: **"For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance--now that He has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant"**(Heb. 9:15).

There is more that makes God’s new covenant even better than the old covenant. God’s new covenant is meant for all. This is good news for us who are Gentiles, by birth not members of the nation of Israel. St. Paul writes: **"Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ"**(Ephesians 2:12-13).

We have been included us into His new covenant in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. He forgives our sins. He gives us faith to trust Him. He says, “I have called you by name; you are Mine.” Day by day we look forward to God fulfilling His new covenant in us.

Now we live and look ahead in this new covenant. *There are parts of this new covenant that have not yet come to completion!* “**The days are coming when no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and his brother, saying ‘Know the Lord, for they will all know Me’**” but that day has not yet come. We are still sinners and we still need to be taught how to live as God’s people. God teaches us through His Word, and we still need a daily spiritual reconstruction if we are to be His people and He our God. Daily we still need to be taught “to see Him more clearly, to love Him more dearly, to follow Him more nearly, and to serve Him more sincerely.” (Oscar Feucht in *Learning to Use Your Bible*)

This is also why we keep on returning to the Lord’s Supper—for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith. Here God says to us, “**I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.**” God’s new covenant is also a covenant of blood—Jesus blood shed for us to cleanse us of all our sins. Imagine that! Those sins that you can’t seem to forget - the premarital sex, the divorce you went through, the drunken binge, God says that He really doesn’t remember it!

How could God, who has a perfect memory, not remember some of your sins? Remember how God in the beginning created all things out of nothing by the power of His Word? By the power of that same Word God forgives our sins because Jesus died for them. Because of Jesus God says they no longer exist! God is faithful, God will never break His covenant of blood, signed when our Redeemer died, sealed when He was glorified!

The days are coming says the Lord, when He will bring us. His new creation in Christ, home to heaven. Then we all will know Him face to face. He will be our God and we will be His people forever and ever. Amen.

B, Lent 5—March 18, 2018