1/2-3/21 Claiming the Covenant Rev. Amy Haines

Jer 31:31-34 Covenant Renewal

We made it to a new year! And with a new year comes hope, and with hope comes possibility!

How many of you begin a new year by making a resolution or two? How good are you at keeping your resolutions? How many resolutions are broken or forgotten by month’s end?

I gave up making resolutions years ago, mostly because I often forgot about them instead of living by them, but I honor those who make resolutions and stick to them.

How often are these new year resolutions to better ourselves or our relationships with those around us? Losing weight; exercising; being a better person; getting out of debt; trying something new; praying more intentionally.

At the beginning of 2020, one poll had “actually doing my new year’s resolution” as the top resolution, and “upgrade my technology” also made the top ten. At least that one happened for many people this year!

At their core, resolutions are hopeful yearnings for a better tomorrow.

Yet as Christians, we are called to live by hope each and every day, no matter if the calendar says it is the beginning of a new year or the end of a long year. Hope calls us forward. Hope keeps us moving. Hope encourages our dreaming. Without hope, we despair. Without hope, we languish. Without hope, we have no real future.

Throughout Advent and now this Christmas season, we have heard the Scriptures offer us much needed hope and promise, reminding us that God is still with us, God still loves us and forgives us, and God still calls us to live by faith, hope and love.

Today’s scripture continues in that same vein, to offer us hope and promise as we begin a new year.

A contemporary of Isaiah, Jeremiah was a prophet speaking for God during some of the darkest days of our faith history—the Babylonian exile. Israel had been defeated by the Assyrians. Judah had been carried away by the Babylonians.

All visible signs of God’s covenant with God’s people at Mt. Sinai were gone- the Temple lay in ruins, the Ark of the Covenant was no more, and the people were no longer in the Promised Land.

For years Jeremiah had been speaking God’s word of judgment and condemnation, words that reminded the people of God that once again they had rebelled against God and were paying for their sins. They knew that they had pushed the cycle of sin and forgiveness too far, and wondered if God had finally given up on God’s people.

Yet in today’s text, instead of doom and gloom, Jeremiah suddenly offered words of hope and restoration. He began to speak God’s words of promise, and he began to assure the people in exile that judgment was not God’s final word. Jeremiah reminded the people that even though they had sinned, God had not given up on them. God would still be faithful to God’s covenant, but in a new way.

Jeremiah then declared that God would make a new covenant with God’s people, both those from Israel and those from Judah. This new covenant would not be written on tablets of stone, but on their hearts. This new covenant would be based in relationships rather than rules.

Through this new covenant God still claimed the people as God’s people, and God still offered forgiveness of sin.

Consider the word of God Jeremiah proclaimed.

God still declared: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Even as the covenant changed, God’s faithfulness never changed. God continued to claim men and women as beloved sons and daughters. God never turned God’s back on God’s people, even when they turned their back on him.

This is a constant throughout the scriptures. God claims us, then calls us, and invites us into an ongoing relationship with Almighty God! This relationship is not based on merit or rules, but on God’s desire and God’s love for each and every one of us.

God then promised a new covenant:

“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.”

Unlike the Ten Commandments written in stone, this new covenant would be written on the hearts of God’s people. Their motivation to live together as God’s people would now come from the inside out rather than from an external forced set of rules and regulations.

Compare our motivation to follow God’s law to the motivation to play piano. I have two sons who currently take piano lessons. Sometimes they practice because I force them to practice.

But sometimes they sit down to play not because I am telling them to, but because there is a song they want to learn. For Timothy this past Christmas, the song was “Sing We Now of Christmas.” For Nathan, the song is often some tune from Mario Brothers. Which songs do you think they will play more often? Not the ones I force them to play.

God doesn’t force us to follow God’s Law. Instead, God has given us the will to choose whether or not to follow God. Sometimes we break the law intentionally, and other times accidentally.

Often even though we desire to do so, our human nature draws us into another direction. God’s Law was originally given as boundary markers for our relationships one with another, but we have turned them into forced rules.

God through Jeremiah says, no more. God’s new covenant will come from within, from a desire to be in relationship. And when we desire to be in relationship, then we will strive to live by God’s ways.

 God continued:

“No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

This promise is not just for the leaders and the learned. God offered God’s covenant to all people, men and women, young and old, the least to the greatest, those in exile and those left behind.

Not only does this covenant move from rules to relationship, it also moves from knowing *about* God to *knowing* God, moving from a head religion to a heart religion.

Have you ever seen an athlete try to perform only out of their head and not their heart?

An ice skater performs flawlessly all of the jumps and spins and required elements, but is missing a passion for the sport and a heart connection with the music or with the audience.

Athletes who appear to live only out of the heads seem almost robotic in their movements, getting technically better each day, but you never see any real emotion from them, never getting a glimpse of how they feel or how they are reacting to the highs and lows of their particular game.

Today we use the term “head” to mean someone who appears analytical and devoid of emotion and we use the term “heart” to mean someone who appears to be highly influenced by their emotions.

In the time of Jeremiah, however, the heart was seen as more than just the center of emotion or even the base of love. In the Hebrew language the heart was used as a term for the whole person, not only the center of emotions but also the center of the intellect, the will, and moral values. The heart was the core of being.

So, for example, when Deuteronomy 6 calls us to “love the Lord your God with all of your heart” it calls for a conscious, willful decision to live in love with God, to put into practice what is felt as well as what is believed.

When God seeks to write a new covenant on our hearts, God yearns for God’s people to know God in the depth of our very being.

Even though we do not deserve God’s grace, God continues to offer God’s people forgiveness and redemption: “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

What a gift of love, to wipe clean the slate of our sins and then forget we ever sinned!

It is as if God had us type into the computer a list of every wrong we have done and every deed we have left undone, all our hurts, all our sins, all our failures, and then, instead of printing out the list and holding it against us the rest of our lives, instead of publishing it all over the world wide web for all the world to see, God hits the delete key and wipes this list from his computer hard drive in such a way that it can never be recovered, to proclaim that the list of our sins has never existed. What a gift of love, to forgive and forget and offer us a new relationship! That gift is offered to us through the gift of God’s Son Jesus, and Jesus’ death on the cross.

These are God’s promises—not only to people in exile long ago, but also, to all of us this day!

And today, we have the additional promise of God with us through the gift of God’s Son Jesus!

Give thanks that even here in 2021, God still does not give up on us! God still offers us the gift of this covenant, of a relationship with God, not through following rules and commandments, but through a relationship with God’s Son Jesus.

God still desires us to know God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. God still desires to forgive us and restore us so that we can then live as God’s people in this world, sharing and showing the light of Christ through our lives.

Are we ready to claim this covenant for ourselves?

Are we ready to know God at the core of our being?

Are we ready to renew our faith in Jesus?

We do not claim the covenant today because God forces us to do so. We do so because we choose to be in relationship with God through our faith in God’s Son Jesus. We choose as those who yearn for a relationship rather than a contractual obligation.

We can choose such relationship not because we are perfect, but because we are loved. We can choose such relationship not because we have our lives all together, but because God seeks to assist us on our journeys. We can choose such relationship not because we have to, but because we want to.

Today, as we turn now to the Covenant Renewal Service, today, as we come to Christ’s table of Holy Communion, come knowing who and whose we are. We are God’s beloved. God chooses to claim us. God chooses to forgive us. God chooses to restore us.

May we start off this year giving thanks for God’s covenantal love, and responding with our commitment to Christ at the center of our lives.

As we turn now to the Wesleyan Covenant Renewal Service, please know that the words we are about to offer to God are words of commitment, words of intentional obedience, words of willing surrender.

If you have known Jesus for a few months or for many years, I invite you to pray these words as a prayer of renewal, recommitting your life to Christ’s ways.

If you want to know God in 2021, welcoming Jesus into your heart and life as Savior and Lord,

I invite you to prayer these words as a prayer of commitment, opening your heart to God’s love and grace.

Then, throughout this new year, may we all live into God’s covenant with hope, faith and love.