

**Sermon for March 22, 2015 (Lent 5, Year B)**  
**Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: Jeremiah **31:31-37** CEB; Psalm 119; John 12:20-33

Know what: new covenant, Israel as God's chosen

So what:

Now what:

Title:

"The time is coming, declares the LORD...I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts...they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jeremiah 31:31,33,34).

Today we are given the final installment in our Lenten lectionary readings focused upon God's covenant with the people of Israel.

Here the LORD promises a new covenant which will mark a different kind of relationship between God and the people.

Why is this needed?

Well, Jeremiah seems to suggest that the original covenant at Sinai was not upheld by the Israelites, because it was perceived as fear-based, perhaps even viewed as the demands of an authoritarian God who lorded it over them.

Fear, however, can never define the kind of relationship desired by the living God. "I was their husband, declares the LORD."

But what's the real difference, you ask?

My friends, I think that we all instinctively know the difference between actions performed on the basis of desire, interest, and affection, and those inspired by fear.

This past week, Erin and I had to rent a van from U-Haul in order to transport many of Erin's large paintings back from her show which was up over the winter at Fryeburg Academy.

If you haven't rented from U-Haul in some time, you may not be aware of what the U-Haul staff now asks at the end of each transaction as part of their usual script.

The man at the counter said to us, as we were finishing our transaction, “Do you want to add insurance on this vehicle for only \$11 more? If you do not, and if you are involved in an accident, you automatically give permission to U-Haul to charge up to \$35,000 on your credit card immediately.”

What was that? Up to \$35,000 charged on my card – instantly! Seems like a no-brainer, right? I mean, what is \$11 compared to \$35,000? So of course, we paid extra for this coverage.

But it left a sour taste in my mouth, and as we drove away, I started thinking and I said to Erin,

“Now wait a minute. Do you see what just happened with that extra insurance premium? Do you see how quickly that guy turned the entire transaction into a fear-based scenario? Let me ask you this: do you think that U-Haul is honestly concerned about protecting you and me from financial risk?”

“No, of course not,” she replied.

Exactly! What a devious and cynical move on their part.

My apologies to any of you if you are connected in any way with U-Haul!

But this is how I see it!

By carefully inserting this threat before making payment and by playing off of their customer’s realistic fears of financial turmoil, they are virtually guaranteed an extra \$11 from every single transaction! What an easy way to pad your profit margin!

But here’s the problem. We all know that it’s not genuine. It’s false. U-Haul is not trying to protect us. They are trying to maximize their profits.

And what is one sure way to make that happen? What’s better for that than a healthy dose of fear!

We all know that fear is a powerful tool for controlling human behavior.

Especially when they are standing in line, ready to swipe their card through the reader and be on their way. A little fear can go a long way in that circumstance!

What had been hinted at and implied in earlier texts becomes explicit in the mouth of Jeremiah:

God loves the chosen people with steadfast loyalty, and God longs to be loved in return. Love, not fear, is to be defining mark of the covenant people.

The new covenant then is obedience to the Torah which springs up naturally from within because the people are ravished by the extravagant faithfulness of God, like when one's eyes are ravished by the most beautiful sunset ever witnessed.

It's been nearly 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the doors of the castle church in Wittenberg and so began the Reformation that forever altered the course of Western history.

This occurred on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October in the year 1517. It is an event which stands in history as a decisive, pivotal and momentous action. The truth, however, is that Luther's conversion was a much slower and more complex process.

For years, he had been afraid of God. He became a monk primarily because of fear. When he was a young and tender 21, Martin Luther was walking along the road to Erfurt in present-day Germany when a severe thunderstorm overwhelmed him. The lightning struck with ferocity all around, and Luther – faithful Catholic that he was then – screamed out his prayer: “Help me, Saint Anne! And I will become a monk.”

He followed through on his promise, but not necessarily because he wanted to!

He was obligated by his own rash promise made in the face of fear. And he was convinced that if he did not fulfill his vow, God would not forgive him.

Fear was the defining mark of his relationship with God, but Luther knew that something was wrong. He hated the idea that God kept careful accounts of our wrong-doings. As a monk, he was known to spend hours at a time confessing his sins, just in case he left any out and was convicted of a sin not yet absolved by a priest. But he knew that he was off the mark.

Eventually, through careful meditation on Paul's letter to the Romans, the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to see what he had been missing all along: GOD chooses to forgive and to make us complete and whole. Our task is faith. Our job is to trust in the goodness of God.

He had found the clue to unlock the mystery of how to love God with all of one's heart, soul, mind and strength.

Our primary task is trust and gratitude and praise. When that light bulb went on inside of him, Luther described it like this:

*“Now I felt myself to be entirely reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.”*

But, of course, as we all know, this is not the end of the story, but only the necessary beginning.

What did we hear today in John's Gospel?

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

God loves with steadfast loyalty, and God longs to be loved in return. But how do we show our love for God? What does it look like when obedience naturally springs up within us because we are ravished by the extravagant faithfulness of God?

The shape of this new way of life is nothing else but the shape of the cross.

To serve the Lord is to follow in his way, and his way is characterized forever by giving away his life and his self for the sake of others.

Perhaps you see the world differently than I do, but I am continually dumbstruck by the unending flow of human suffering on this planet.

Here is one example out of far too many:

The civil war in Syria has now lasted longer than our own civil war in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Well over 200,000 people killed, more than 6 million people displaced as refugees, priceless treasures of human civilization dating back to biblical times destroyed daily, and there is absolutely no end in sight.

So much pain and suffering. So many problems in the world. What can we do in the face of it all? I wish I knew the answer. I wish I had a solution.

It seems so overwhelming, but what I know is this: we can walk together in the way of the cross.

Self-giving, self-offering, self-emptying. This is how we participate in God's healing work in the world. We give ourselves away.

This is the way of Jesus. And whoever serves him must follow him.

Here is an easy test to know if you are in fact walking in his way:

Anything that does NOT lead you to give your life away, give your material goods away, give your heart away to and for others – anything that leads in THIS direction is not from God.

Fear causes people to cling to things more tightly, to refuse to let go.

But we are people who gather here because our hearts have been ravished by the extravagant and faithful love of God.

U-Haul doesn't really care about us. And you know that all of the companies which promise you so many great things in their commercials – even the ones that offer excellent customer service – at the end of the day, you know that they don't care about you. They care only about the bottom line.

But God has no bottom line other except for you. And me. And the Syrian people.

Because of that, we are free to give ourselves away.

Will you figure out how to give yourself away, walking in the way of the cross, for the sake of love alone? May it be so. Amen.