

3-21-2021. 5th Sunday of Lent.

Welcome friends, to our Lenten service/ celebration/ prayer this Sunday, March 21st Spring equinox. As we turn towards the sun, we invite our own hearts to turn towards the true and real light.

Let us pray.

God, all that we have all that we are is gift from you and we like the Earth turned towards you to bloom and flourish the Abundant good gifts of New Life which you have promised. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

This first text in **Jeremiah** today, **chapter 31**, is one of my favorites. It's about the new Covenant. [31: 31-34]

"Look, the days are coming, God declares, when I shall make a new covenant with the house of Israel, not like the covenant I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt, the covenant which they broke, even though I was their God. No, no, this covenant I shall make with the house of Israel when the days come, for, God declares, within them. I shall plant my law writing it on their hearts that I shall be their God and they will be my people. There will be no further need for everyone to teach their neighbor or brother or sister saying 'Learn to know God; learn to know God.' No, they will all know me, from the least to the greatest, God declares, since I shall forgive their guilt and nevermore call to mind their sin."

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[Gary Sponholtz plays and sings, Psalm 51, *Give Me A Clean Heart*]

Psalm 51

*Forgive me, Lord, in your mercy;
blot out my sins.
I know that you love truth;
then, in the secret of my heart,
teach me your wisdom.
Cleanse my spirit; wash me,
and I shall be whiter than snow.
Take my guilt upon you; wipe out*

*every last trace of my separateness.
Return me to myself; make me
pure as a newborn child.
Fill me with peace and gladness,
that the bones that have been crushed
may now rejoice.
Create a pure heart within me, O God;
let my soul wake up in your light.
Open me to your presence;
flood me with your holy spirit.
Then I will stand and sing/send?? out
the power of your mercy.
I will teach your love to the ignorant;
the lost will find their way home.
O Lord open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.*

Praise to the God who is; praise to the God who was; praise to the God who is to come for ages unending. Amen.

The Gospel for today is from **John, chapter 12.** [12: 20-28, 31-32]

Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and made this request, 'Sir, we would like to meet Jesus.' Philip told Andrew, and Andrew and he together went to Jesus and told him, and Jesus replied,

*Now the hour has come
for the Son of man to be glorified.
In all truth. I tell you,
unless a grain of wheat falls into the
earth and dies,
it remains only a single grain;
but if it dies*

*it yields a rich harvest.
Anyone who loves their life loses it,
and anyone who hates their life in this
world
will keep it in eternal life.
Whoever serves me, follows me,
and my servants will be with me
wherever I am.
If anyone serves me, Abba Imma will
honor you.
Now, my soul is troubled.
What shall I say: Father, save me from this hour?
But it is for this hour, for this very reason,
that I have come.
Abba, glorify your name!'*

A voice from the heavens came and said, 'I have glorified it and will glorify it again.'

*Jesus continued,
Now sentence is being passed on
this world;
now the prince of this world is to be
driven out.
And when I am lifted up from the
earth,
I shall draw all people to myself.'*

The word of God.

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In the name of God, Abba Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I do love this Jeremiah passage, because of the way in which it speaks of the Covenant that [was] originally established and that which is being renewed within the life of Christ. The word covenant is distinctive--it is not a deal or a contract. It

is a unilateral commitment on the part of one party to the other party: no matter what your behavior or response, I promise that I should be this way towards you. The context, God reminds all of us, was the Liberation, the Exodus of people from Egypt. *'I'm the one who brought you out, who gave you this new flourishing life; and I invite you now to covenant with me, so that we may reveal to the world this profound truth and compassion, according to which we can all live.'*

God's covenant--named ever so poorly the Ten Commandments--which are really the Ten Words, the Ten Dynamic Truths meant to pierce human hearts [is] unconditional on God's part, no matter what your response. As we heard in Jeremiah, they broke [the Covenant] with God. God's response remains unconditional grace, mercy, compassion. God is always for us--always for us, the whole of humanity, and for the beauty of the earth.

Jeremiah longs for that day, for that poet's, prophet's vision, when there will be an intimacy of relationship with the divine. For that to happen, when the very law of God is literally in each of us, no longer will brother-sister teach you anything, for they will know within what is truthful, what is pleasing, what is life-giving, what creates blessings for all of us. For that to happen, there must be this intimacy of relationship with God, which first of all, requires on our part a receptivity, to receive that word, that truth.

It is like a seed being planted in the springtime season, yes? The seed must fall on loose, open, free ground in order to take root. Jesus speaks elsewhere--you toss seed on a path, it gets trampled; among rocks, the roots don't take hold; you put it among thorns, it gets choked, right? It has to be on fertile soil which is available, and open, not rigid and closed.

And, we human beings live from the inside out, yes? That's why in Jeremiah's vision it's longing, the seed taking root within us, [that] first stirs us to a new awareness or sense of connection and aliveness, and then permeates who we are, and our actions and choices.

There is a profound connection these days between the disaster of our interior lives, and the mess our country is in. Religion is not a privatized affair. It is not. It's about touching that opening, creative energy of what we call God, which

manifests itself within us, so that it permeates who we are, and how we live, and our values. Because we have sometimes no interior life--or there is an upheaval of distractions that keeps our focus scattered and disturbed. You know many of us aren't religious. I know; I get it; I know why. The institutional stuff has caused huge damage. But...we throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Is truth even possible? Does wisdom matter? That's why we're in this mess. And when we refuse to live honestly with ourselves, when we start to hide behind the idols of power, or greed, or race, then we are even willing--if we hide behind them--we become even willing to kill, in order to defend our blindness. We don't want to see the truth of the other, or who we are.

This is why the psalmist in Psalm 51 so fervently prays--

'Cleanse me, open me, wash me, renew me.

*Give me a trustworthy heart, that I might see you,
and to see all in you, Holy One.'*

We can never get enough of the Psalm 51, that *'in the secret of my heart, teach me wisdom.'*

'And they will, each and every one, know me from within.' Jeremiah prays, longs for, commits his life to it.

Dr. Casey Barton is now a retired orthoped. He and Adrian were members here at Peace some years back. When I had my back surgery two and a half years ago, Casey was a consultant, a very wise guy for me, both for preparations and the whole process.

I have nothing but gratitude to Casey and Adrian for their support. Casey told me two things that I'd like to pass on you today.

In preparation for my back surgery, he said, 'First, Steve, promise me that you will never, never, never, ever, ever, ever, allow Bev to look online about back surgeries. Why? Because all that information is reported there to freak you out. (*Some of you have you had that experience. Maybe the whole of the internet should just be limited to cat videos, I'm not sure? But it's about freaking people out. And this is so much of the commotion in the society in which we live, isn't it? We're just barraged, and what can we believe, and who cares anymore? And just turn to the freak out.*) It's a terrible way to live, and it is spiritually impossible.

The second thing that Casey advised me to do, is he said, "Steve, please, whatever your surgeon asks of you, just say yes--everything regarding preparation for that surgery, and day of--please, just go along with whatever he, or she, wants to suggest." I found this easy to follow because Casey said, "The surgeon wants the best for you, and he wants the best for himself. He's assembling the A-team, alright, to limit any unpredictable scenarios, so that in the surgery he can concentrate, and provide his creative, healing best." I was so glad for that advice; it was so easy to follow--just open the door to say 'Yes'.

Well, I think Casey's advice is a bit like and about God. It is not getting simply control of the situation, although that is part of it. But God, as I've said, is always for us, encouraging us. This is what the work of Jesus is about--is to say, to reveal that God is not the super-accountant who's out to get us. God is the one who's always for us, who wants to encourage our creative best, and manifest who we are. Just say Yes.

In the Gospel text, Jesus speaks of how his 'hour has come'. That's a really big word in John's Gospel: the hour's here; the hour's at hand--the moment of decision, of choice, of commitment. And Jesus says, "Should I avoid this hour?" Absolutely not.

But what is this hour, in which he glorifies the name of God?

It's when Jesus is lifted up onto the Cross, there to expose the idols of the human heart, there to reveal the grace and mercy of God, there to liberate us once again in the new Covenant, to commit our lives to God's compassion for our world.

This is not about Jesus' suffering--suffering is something that he goes through. The intention is to free our hearts. It is to open and loosen the soil of our being, so that that word of mercy can sink in and transform us into Sons and Daughters of God.

I like very much the Hebrew Jewish mystic name for God, which is *Ein Sof*, which means endlessness. Muse on that would you? That God is the endlessness of mercy, understanding, of grace and joy. The mystery of grace required nothing less than the life of Christ, that total commitment to us. But that is the new Covenant

in which we now live, and what we celebrate in the Eucharist every Sunday. We hear Jesus' own words. "This cup is the new Covenant of Liberation, costing not less than everything", and not depending upon our response, though we are invited to embody this endless mercy now.

Buechner is a theologian, who made this comment about the Incarnation of God: *"'The word became flesh,' St John wrote, 'and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.'"* (John 1: 14) And that's what the Incarnation means--the flesh being filled, our flesh, with grace and truth. He said, "This is un-theological; it is unsophisticated; it is undignified. But according to Christian teachings, it's the way things are....God not only made the earth; God has walked upon it, eaten with us, slept on it, that Christ has worked among us and even died on it. If we are saved anywhere, then we are saved here. And what is saved is not some 'diaphanous distillation' of our bodies." What is saved is our bodies, on this earth, at this time, in these lives. "One of the blunders religious people are especially fond of making," Buechner says, "is our attempt to be more spiritual than God."

Give it up. The new Covenant is among us.

Thanks be to God.

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God of endless truth, mercy, wisdom, grace, compassion, you who have touched our lives and made us real with insights and understanding, with families, with people to serve and heal and bless, be, God, renewed within our hearts this day, that we might grow with the fullness of love for which Christ has given his life and is raising us up. We pray in Christ's name.

The Lord bless you, and keep you; his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen.