

"It's Free!" A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
March 18, 2018 Fifth Sunday in Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

During Lent, the scripture lessons we've been looking at have been about God's covenant with the Hebrew people. The first covenant was with Noah after the flood. The second with Abraham - a covenant for all people - that God would bless Abraham's offspring - that's you and me. Today, we have mention of another covenant. The covenant mentioned today is a covenant that restores a relationship.

Unlike most people today, the people living in Old Testament times could identify with and relate to the term covenant. Covenant was normally an agreement where both parties had responsibilities. As the scriptures have revealed, with God's covenant, the agreements are one-sided. The blessings the covenant bring are all from God, free of charge.

Why a new covenant? Today's scripture reading from Jeremiah was written when the Hebrew people were in exile in Babylon. The Babylonians had moved them out of God's Promised Land to a foreign country many miles from their homes. Needless to say, the people longed to return to their homeland.

God had allowed the Hebrew people to be conquered because they had worshipped foreign gods and had not kept God's commandments. The people took advantage of the poor and each other. They no longer loved the Lord God with all their heart and did not love their neighbor as themselves.

God tried to tell the people that they were heading for trouble. God had sent prophets to warn the people that God was going to punish them for their behavior, but they did not listen - and they ended up in Babylon, a discouraged people.

But God didn't give up on the people. Today's scripture talks of restoration. God is giving good news to discouraged people!

Some of you history buffs may remember a time in the USA's recent history when our nation needed to hear such good news. That good news came from FDR and his fireside chats. Franklin D. Roosevelt, usually referred to as FDR, ran for president promising a new deal for the American people. He was elected and took office on March 4, 1933.

After the election, President Roosevelt did something no other president had done. With the country mired in the Great Depression with its high unemployment and all the bank closures, FDR held his first of 30 fireside chats. That day was March 12, 1933, just eight days after his swearing in as president of the USA.

I've heard stories from my parents about the difficult times they had during the depression. I've read in history books descriptions of how terrible it was to even survive during that time. I know that my parents' lives were marked by the depression because they had lived through a time when they wondered where the next meal was coming from and if the jobs they had were secure and would provide income for their family.

At the first fireside chat, FDR talked about the banking issue. He explained in simple terms why the banks had failed and why he had closed the banks on March 6th. He described the measures that Congress was taking to make sure that bank failures would never happen again. During the radio broadcast, Roosevelt asked the American public to show confidence in their government by depositing money in their local banks when the banks reopened the next day. And the American public responded. Many who listened to his talk deposited money in the banks and a crisis was averted.

FDR promised a new deal as opposed to the old deal that had gotten the country into the Great Depression. He delivered on that promise with new programs such as Social Security, unemployment insurance, price supports for farmers, a minimum wage for workers, insurance for bank deposits, and regulation of the stock market.

During Jeremiah's time as I mentioned, the Hebrew people were living in a foreign land under what we might call the 'old deal.' The country that had conquered them and in which they lived was godless and oppressive. The discouraged Hebrew people longed for a 'new deal.'

God provided that 'new deal' assuring the Hebrew people that God was with them. Earlier in Jeremiah we learn that God will relent from God's anger, return the people to their homeland, that prosperity will return as will joy. What good news! On top of all that God was going to forgive them and remember their sin no more. Now that's a great 'new deal!'

Many times each of us has longed for a second chance, a chance to start over. We'd love a second chance at love, with relationships, career, family, and grandkids. Many of us have hoped for a new beginning in some area of our lives.

Today's scripture provides that new beginning! Each of us can take advantage of what God offers in this scripture. **For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.**

As Christ followers, we know this new deal is confirmed by Jesus on the night of his betrayal when he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup, saying "This cup is the new covenant, the new relationship with God made possible because of my death. Do this in remembrance of me."

God provided the Hebrew people a 'new deal' and offers that same new deal to us through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Will you take it? Will you accept that God forgives you and remembers your sin no more?

I read a story on the web this week about a pastor who had clipped a coupon for a discount at the movies. It was for 50% off an admission ticket. Being a pastor and having a pastor's schedule it took some time to find a date and a movie that she wanted to see. Finally, on that day, she could use the coupon she had clipped and save half the admission price of a movie.

Standing at the ticket booth, she presented her coupon to the ticket seller who rejected it. The person in the ticket booth explained that she could not use her 50% off coupon for this movie. After waiting and anticipating, the pastor was disappointed to hear those words. It was the movie she wanted to see. It was on a day she had time to go to the movies. Now, her coupon was no good.

The story goes on. After the initial rush of disappointing emotion, she heard the ticket booth attendant say that a company had purchased the movie theater for the day and the movie the pastor wanted to see was free. There was no need to pay. Her discount coupon wasn't needed.

Even after hearing the movie was free, she was still focused on using her discount coupon and was still a bit miffed. But after about 20 seconds she came to her senses and realized that she was receiving a free movie ticket. There was no need to worry about using a discount coupon. The movie was free. She needed to forget about the coupon.

For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. God provides a new deal, a free deal. Are you taking advantage of it or are you still trying to use your discount coupon?