

Getting A Do-Over
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

Four years ago this week, the world shut down. There was a new virus called COVID-19 making its initial rounds of the world. Things were not looking good. We knew only that it was a coronavirus that had originated in Wuhan, China; that it was extremely contagious; and that anyone who got it had a very high chance of dying from it. The authorities had only one solution to try to stop it, which was closing almost everything and telling everyone to stay home. And they meant everything and everyone. There were no restaurants, no stores outside of groceries and places like Home Depot, no sporting events, and no church. In the span of just a couple of days, we went from "gather in smaller numbers and with caution" to "stay home."

The last in-person service held here was a wedding that took place literally within hours of the shutdown order. As Jim, Julie, and I were locking up the building afterward, we said to each other, "See you sometime, I guess." Little did we know then that it would be 17 months before we were back to holding worship in person on any sort of regular basis. And we also didn't know that we were in the middle of a slow-rolling, national trauma of which we're still experiencing the aftereffects. Despite thinking we've worked through enough of it to have arrived at some sort of "new normal," what all that looks like is actually not all that clear just yet. And there are days when it still feels like we are stuck in an old-school disaster movie, and without knowing what would be left of the world afterward, who the heroes would be, or even how it would end.

Regardless of the how, what, when, or why, humanity seems to have a peculiar fascination with, and talent for, destruction. When we find ourselves in the middle of it, which is probably far more often than any of us would like, the “what next?” reaction is often followed by one of two things. We either throw in the towel and give up on the situation completely, believing there is absolutely nothing in our power to affect a change for the better. Or, we roll up our sleeves, grab a shovel, and start to clear away the debris, choosing instead to believe that we, and God along with us, can somehow make things right again. In choosing the latter, we decide in favor of hope – hope that, despite whatever forces may have brought disaster raining down on us, God will act, and something new will rise from the ashes.

Amid the unparalleled disaster that resulted from the Babylonians’ visit to Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah chooses hope over despair. It’s not that he isn’t upset that things have come to this. He is probably the most human of all the prophets in terms of how he delivers the news that Jerusalem and its inhabitants are in big trouble. He whines about it a lot, particularly when the people refuse to believe him and laugh him out of the room. And yet, he still dares to give voice to God’s message of hope “that the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will put my law within them, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:31, 33, NRSV).

The idea of a covenant between God and God’s people is not a new one. The language Jeremiah uses to describe it here takes us back to the initial covenant God makes with Abram in the book of Genesis. There, God promises Abram a land he will show him, and descendants to inhabit it. Abram, despite his righteous belief in this

promise, needs to see it so he can believe it. He asks God for proof. So God has him perform what has to be one of the strangest sacrifices on record. Abram cuts a heifer, a goat, a ram, and a couple of birds in half, then lay the pieces down on the ground in a row. When it is night, God's flaming torch and fire pot pass between the pieces to seal the deal. This is called "cutting a covenant" in many of the cultures of the Ancient Near East. It was a way of leveling the playing field between two vastly unequal parties. It guaranteed obedience on the part of the less powerful ones. It also reinforced for the stronger ones that failing to live up to their end of the bargain would result in their being cut up like the animals in the sacrifice.¹ It was a simple, yet effective way of getting the point across that there was an agreement, and the penalty for failing to live up to it was death.

This gruesome image is probably not quite what Jeremiah and his contemporaries had in mind as they mourned the smoking ruins of their beloved city and its Temple. Like it was for us with Covid four years ago, about all they could be sure about was that something had gone very wrong, and they had to at least try to figure out why. The words of comfort and hope Jeremiah speaks on God's behalf are not what anyone expected to hear in this moment. The message in them could not be clearer: that God, no matter how angry or frustrated God might be, does not give up on us. And if that's the case, maybe we shouldn't give up, either. This new covenant of forgiveness, which God has etched into our hearts, would seem to depend on nothing less.

The other thing this new covenant includes is a renewal of the relationships among members of the community, and between the community and God. Engaging in

¹ Robert R. Wilson, "Genesis 12." Class Lecture, Old Testament Interpretation, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut, September 28, 2009.

that work requires at least some recognition that the purely human tools we have at our disposal for doing the repair work may not be enough. We need help, and in a way that only God can provide. It takes cooperation between our gifts and God's grace to make this change a permanent one – or, as Jeremiah puts it, we must have enough trust in God to no longer say to one another, “know the LORD.” By the act of living into this new covenant, we will all know God, from the greatest to the least (Jer. 31:34). This new knowledge gives us a powerful vision of a life of faith. As modeled for us by Jesus himself, it's one that seeks constantly to reconcile our human perceptions of the world with the world God intended.²

It is still very much a work in progress, as we go about learning and re-learning what this vision is about, especially against the backdrop of a world, and a church, that is very much not what we thought it was in March of 2020. However, it's been about the only thing we can count on remaining constant in the middle of a world which is busy turning itself upside down and inside out. God hasn't abandoned us. Not by a long shot. Even when we are faced with one of the most frightening things nearly all of us have encountered during our lifetimes, and with all of the aftereffects which are still working their way through the system, God is still there, faithfully waiting for us to acknowledge it, and for at least long enough to try to understand, and believe, what God will show us.

²Samuel K. Roberts, “Theological Perspective: Jeremiah 31:31-34.” *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2 (Lent Through Eastertide)*, Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett, Editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 126.