“Which Generation?”

Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33

March 17, 2024

***Jeremiah 31:31-34***

***31******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. 32It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 33But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord******: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.***

***John 12:20-33***

***Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus***

***20Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24Very truly, I tell you, 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. 25Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.***

***Jesus Speaks about His Death***

***27“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” 29The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” 30Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” 33He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.***

I found this really great little reel on Facebook, that showed a man standing in a very cold and windy environment, pouring hot tea from a teapot into a cup. Except the wind blew the tea coming out of the teapot so firmly that the tea never got a chance to land in the cup. The caption said, “parents trying to give advice to teens.”

I wonder if this is how God felt when in Exodus 19, just after God has promised to be God for the Israelites, in verse 8, the Israelites say “Everything the Lord has spoken we will do.” And then proceed to break that promise to God. All throughout the next six books of the bible, are stories of the Israelites breaking their promise to God, and God finding ways to restore their relationship anyway. Known as the “weeping prophet” Jeremiah is full of the woes to come to the Israelites because of all of their broken promises. So what a pleasant surprise to find from this weeping prophet, these two chapters in Jeremiah called “The Little Book of Consolation.” Jeremiah shares a little bit of hope for the relationship between God and the people.

God says, through Jeremiah, “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.” If we were an adult Confirmation Class, it might be fun to have a quiz asking what are the covenants that we have covered in the last few weeks? God’s covenant with Noah, Abraham, and Moses and the Law and the Book of the Covenant. The language in the Old Testament is full of words that refer to God restoring right relationships between the people and God. We read words like everlasting covenant, new heart, new spirit. Here in Jeremiah is the only place in the old testament where the words new covenant are used. Since God has been constantly restoring relationships every time the Israelites fall short, what is new about this new covenant?

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

First, the law will be within them. The law will be written on their hearts. There will no longer be a need to teach one another about God, because they will already know.

This is good news for the Israelites because at this point the first temple has been destroyed and with it, the stone tablets. One commentator I read says these words from Jeremiah are perfect for the exile generation and the wilderness generation and all of the generations since then.1

All of the generations since then. I wonder how many there have been? To name just a few, in our recent memory, depending on the source of the naming we have

The Greatest Generation (GI Generation) 1901-1927

(never heard of) The Silent Generation (silent during McCarthyism) (1928-1945)

Baby Boom (1946-1964)

Gen X (1965-1980)

Millennial/Gen Y (1981-1996)

Gene Z, or what one author calls iGen (1997-2010)

(never heard of) Gen (of course!) Alpha (2010-2024)

The naming of these generations is something that takes place in a haphazard way and becomes a consensus over time, in the media and throughout social groups. For example people born in the 60s and 70’s weren’t named until the 90’s. “However, the arbitrary nature of generational names and spans does not negate the reality that growing up during different eras can have a profound effect.”2

That begs the question then, if Jeremiah’s words are good news for the exile generation and the wilderness generation are they still good news for our generations and the generations to come?

Well, as Christians we almost have to answer yes – because we want it to be so, but also because we may be familiar with Jesus’ words at his final meal with his disciples when he said, after taking the cup, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22) It’s very hard to separate words from the ancient prophet, with actions and words of Jesus, because our Christian tradition puts them together.

The new covenant, described as written on our hearts, is the first description of our relationship with God being of our bodies. There are many spiritual teachers that ask us to define our relationship to God in terms of our five senses. We use phrases like “an embodied faith.” Liturgical art, liturgical dancing, are just two. We Presbyterians don’t like to move much, but when we’re brave we move to the music, we may even lift our hands during the communion when we repeat the words that come from earlier creeds of the church: We say, “**The Lord be with you.** And Also with You. **Lift up your hearts** We lift them up to the Lord – some churches have a traditions of lifting hands here. **Let us give thanks to the Lord our God** It is right to give our thanks and praise.”

And certainly more Pentecostal traditions are not afraid to show their love of God and excitement with swaying bodies and raised arms. The phrase “frozen chosen” comes to mind. An embodied faith like that is really not that unusual – it’s just that one culture reacts against another culture when something is weird, and habits and traditions go back and forth between what is acceptable to one period of time and another. Even putting one’s hands together in prayer, or bowing ones head are ways to embody our faith.

As we approach Easter, we are less able to avoid talking about the cross. Our gospel lesson for today is the first of our new testament lessons during the season of Lent that speaks of the physicality of the cross. The physicality of the person of Christ, not just the concept of God. Jesus, the person, finds himself explaining that now that the Greeks have come to see him, the time has come. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Greek citizens were not among Jesus’ usual audience. For the writer of the gospel of John, the fact that “some Greeks” were asking to see Jesus along with others who came to worship at the festival, was the signal that the hour had come.

Remember John was writing much later than the other gospel writers. So John’s gospel often switches from writing *as* Jesus, to writing *about* Jesus, to Jesus speaking *beyond* his audience to the readers themselves. John has made such a switch when Jesus begins to speak in agricultural analogies about dying before living, and hating ones life in order to gain ones life. These cryptic phrases to hint at the type of death Jesus will die are common in the gospel of John.

Once again there is a voice from the heavens – the only one in this gospel – the baptism events and the transfiguration events do not occur in this gospel – a voice from the heavens that the audience can hear, even if they do mistake it as thunder. In other texts, the voice from heaven served as confirmation for Jesus, or for a select few present at the time. In today’s text, Jesus reminds them that the voice from heaven was for them, not for him. Jesus tells them, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.” From Jesus’ words in today’s text, Jesus is clear about what will happen, and what his death will mean.

The newness of this covenant is not only that it is written on our hearts and that it is an invitation to an embodied faith. The newness of this covenant is that the new covenant in Jesus will both *mean* something and *require* something. It is not enough to learn as much about Biblical stories and events and assess them to be true or false, or symbolic or real, or connected or separate. If Jesus’ life and death, and connection to God’s history with God’s people means something to us, we are required to act. Having an embodied faith means to take it out of our heads and into our hearts. Out of our heads and into our feet. We must hate our lives with the kind of hate that hates the parts of the world that are not part of God’s realm of goodness and life – hate those parts so much that we act to bring God’s hopes for humanity to fruition. Christianity is our path to participating in God’s hopes for humanity. God’s house has many rooms.

We are children of the new covenant. God’s love and grace and mercy are freely given. That’s not where the requirements are. Our requirement is to follow through where and when we can; to respond to that love and grace and mercy, in a way that furthers God’s hope for humanity.

What was good news for the exile and wilderness communities is good news for us, no matter our generation. But our own contexts make a difference. Our culture, our age, our surroundings, make a difference. As we consider our individual responses to God’s continual covenants with us, we need to put our whole selves into context, and that includes the era that surrounds us. Will the good news of the gospel come to the next generations in the same way as it came to our parents and their parents? Will gospel knowledge be enough to make the gospel relevant to next generations? How we engage with those questions will determine whether this Bethany community matters to the generations to come.

Let us pray….

1Working Preacher, Beth L. Tanner, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-jeremiah-3131-34-21>

2<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trend/archive/winter-2018/how-are-generations-named>