

“Gifts, Grapes, and Autographs”

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Rev. Michele Ward October 20, 2019

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church

Throughout the month of October, Andrew and I are preaching on environmental responsibility and our role in advocating for the planet that we call home. Andrew preached on Jeremiah 29 last week, and the command to bloom where we have been transplanted, as it were. This week, we are picking back up in Jeremiah 31 to hear what comes after that command from God to settle in and settle down.

Here, Jeremiah talks about the promise to repopulate the land with livestock and the families with children. God reminds the people that they have watched the community through the times of gathering, destroying, and relocation as well as during the times of planting and building.

God has been with them through all the season that they are in as a community in exile, and God will not leave them. In fact, God promises them something powerful here: the common phrase associated with generational sin, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge,” will no longer apply. This is a proverb about the sins of the parents passing down to their children, essentially. And Jeremiah is saying that this will no longer be the case--in this world where God invites them to truly live without fear of the past or the present, but to build the future they want to see right now.

Jeremiah prophesies that God will make a new kind of covenant--a covenant that isn’t based on the historic ones of the past, like the ones we have heard before, too. It isn’t going to be like the ones made with Abraham and Sarah, Noah and his family, Moses and the people in the wilderness. It will not come written down on tablets of stone like the ten commandments. This covenant is the kind that God will write on our hearts. The kind that is written in invisible ink, the kind that comes from within them.

This kind of covenant isn’t about the maintenance of outside laws, like the previous covenant where they had to remember to follow the rules. Jeremiah prophesies another kind of covenant, one that involves knowing God’s commands so clearly that they come from within each and every one of us. In this kind of world, the

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people don't need anyone to teach them about God because the knowledge of God already dwells inside each and every one.

This is a bold promise to make, isn't it? I mean, it pushes against the whole need to even have churches, right? Why would any of us need to come to church and listen to someone else talk to us about God if what Jeremiah is saying is true?

In this bold promise is a gift - the gift of love. This kind of love comes from a deeper place beyond understanding. This is the only place in the Hebrew Testament that mentions a new covenant, and New Testament writers picked up on this in several places in the gospels and the early writings. This covenant was not to replace the ancestral one with Abraham and Sarah, but the Mosaic covenant. No more will the people need to follow an external code in order to know God. The law will become 'incarnate' and live within them, They will become a community that exists completely because of God's grace, based on God's forgiveness. In this kind of community, everyone knows God because of their 'shared history and present obedience.' As Walter Brueggemann says, 'all know the story, all accept the sovereignty, and all embrace the command.'<sup>1</sup>

I wonder about this kind of covenant and what it has to do with the original command to be stewards of the created world, the command that Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin spoke to us about so eloquently two weeks ago. I wonder what it would mean for us to apply this understanding to this command, as the ancient covenant God put in place with people and creation is still intact, according to Jeremiah.

I think about a woman I met through the BUILD Power Citizens Training last Saturday. She is a member of the Oliver community, just on the other side of Greenmount Cemetery. I live in Greenmount West. A woman named Serena told me her story.

- Member of the Oliver Action Team
- Cares about clean streets
- See the connection between safety, trash and violence
- When people tell her it doesn't matter she tells them that it does because every bit makes a difference
- Same in my neighborhood, too--Greenmount West

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3.*

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- And the same in our city. We are in a trash and recycling crisis here in Baltimore City, and we can do something about it if we believe that the knowledge God gave us to care for this planet and care for one another is deep within us.

Facts about waste and recycling in Baltimore City from the Department of Public Works:<sup>2</sup>

- **Recycling:** While the City does provide a variety of recycling options, the City's recycling rates are among the lowest in Maryland
- **Waste-to-energy:** The privately-owned Baltimore Refuse Energy Systems Co. (BRESCO) waste-to-energy (WTE) plant, where about 75% of the City's waste is currently handled, is aging and may not be a viable long-term option.
- **Landfill:** The City-owned Quarantine Road Landfill—the only solid waste landfill in Baltimore City—is rapidly reaching its permitted capacity, with approximately 7 years remaining at the current rate of disposal

What new covenant has God written upon your heart? And what will you risk to see it all the way through to the end?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://publicworks.baltimorecity.gov/Less-Waste-Better-Baltimore>