

From the Inside Out
Jeremiah 31:27-34
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If the truth be told, I'd like the law of the Lord, that perfect, soul-reviving, sweet honey-tasting, life-giving law of the Lord, to be written not on my heart, but on the insides of my eyelids, thank you very much! Wouldn't that be nice? I'd gaze on it ever so lovingly that way, far more frequently that I do even now. It would be with me when I lie down and when I get up, and truly, ever few seconds when I blink, I'd get a juicy morsel of wisdom that I am sure would be both very tasty and very useful. I mean, Jeremiah tells us that God says "I will put my law *within* them," and hey, the insides of my eyelids are definitely within me, and a lot more accessible than my heart, in more ways than one. But I suppose God doesn't always work the way we think God should work.

Instead we get the law written on our hearts, not exactly like a tattoo, although perhaps that wouldn't be such a bad image for us to use. After all, the original ten commandments were engraved on tablets of stone, a method that at the time was probably as permanent as was possible, and appropriate for the difficult journey ahead of the Israelites. Rugged stone for a rugged journey through the desert and into the promised land, the weight of the stone a reminder of the gravity of the covenant, a covenant that showed them how to live with one another, caring for the land, caring for one another, caring for the widow, the orphan and the

stranger. That the Ten Commandments were written on stone seems somehow fitting given that they were the foundation of the future of God's people. In a sense, they were the cornerstones of the Temple in Jerusalem, for all else rested and depended upon them, even though the Temple itself was built to house them.

But now, in Jeremiah's time, the Temple is destroyed, a casualty of the siege that the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar laid upon the holy city of Jerusalem. No one knows for sure just when the Ark of the Covenant, the container for the tablets, disappeared, but many historians believe it was carried away or destroyed by the Babylonians, or that forward thinking Jewish leaders, taking heed of Jeremiah's warnings, hid the ark to protect it, although if they did, they hid it so well that no one but Indiana Jones knows where to find it. In any case, the Ark, the manifestation of God's physical presence on earth, and the tablets it contained, are barely a part of the conversation in Jeremiah. Indeed, now it is Jeremiah himself who represents God's physical presence on earth, as he brings God's message of both destruction and consolation, and in the absence of the ark and its contents, some other vessel will be needed to carry the sacred information they once bore. And guess what, or better yet, who, that vessel will be? Yes, it's you!

In the story of the Israelites, there is a sort of unspoken, or unwritten link between the presence of the Ark, and the holiness and welfare of the people. When the ark and the tablets are in the picture, things go pretty well. The nation has its ups and downs, but overall God is pleased, life is good, and the enemy is kept at

bay. Indeed, the glory years of Kings David and Solomon were dedicated to providing a “house” for the Lord, more specifically a permanent place for the Ark to reside, and during those years, although it plays a kind of backstage role, the Ark is very much part of the story. To give you an idea of how important the Ark was to the welfare of the nation, early Jewish writings report that upon the entrance of the Ark, the golden tree decorations that adorned the Temple walls blossomed with fruit that grew continuously until the Temple's destruction. But conspicuously, as the nation splits and falls into disarray, as generations of kings and priests worship other gods and sacrifice at foreign altars, neither the ark, nor its contents are mentioned in the story. It is as if the Ark of the Covenant had already disappeared long before the Babylonians invaded, and with it, the Israelites’ commitment to the covenant written on them that God had established with their ancestors. It was into this condition of sin and forgetfulness that God called Jeremiah to prophecy.

Chapters thirty to thirty-three of the book of Jeremiah form what scholars often refer to as the Little Book of Consolation, a few sweet morsels of good news in the midst of dozens of chapters of doom and destruction. These chapters bring God’s message of forgiveness and restoration to a people as broken as the stone tablets they had forgotten about. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break

down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord.” The end of the exile is foretold and a new beginning is envisioned, and everything will be different. No more will the sins of the fathers be visited on the children for multiple generations; everyone will be responsible for their own sins. No more will everyone suffer for the wickedness of the few. No more will “The sin of Judah,” that Jeremiah declared in Chapter 17 was “written with an iron pen; with a diamond point it is engraved on the tablet of their hearts,” no more will it be held against them. “I will forgive their iniquity,” says the Lord, “and remember their sin no more.” And the crowning sign of all of this will be that a new covenant will be written on their hearts, a covenant so close, so intimate, so light, so portable, that no one will forget it again, and neither the nation, nor its citizens, will wander from it again. In fact, people will be drawn to it. What Jeremiah foretold back in chapter three, in the only place he mentions the Ark, will come to pass: “Return, O faithless children, says the Lord, for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the Lord, they shall no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made. At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord, and all

nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will.”

Listen to that again: “The ark of the covenant of the Lord shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made.” What an amazing statement given the history of the ark and the covenant it represented. The ark won’t be made again because it won’t be needed. And it won’t be needed because the new covenant can’t be destroyed or forgotten. You see, the new covenant will be written on imperishable material, and placed in an indestructible vault. It will not be the private property of kings and priests, but become the public domain of fishermen and farmers, seamstresses and song-writers. The law of the Lord, that perfect, soul-reviving, sweet honey-tasting, life-giving law of the Lord, will not be sequestered away in a chamber visited only once a year, or need to be kept at a distance of a thousand cubits as it was when it went before the army of Israel. It will go anywhere God’s people go. It will shed light anywhere God’s people turn their eyes. It will bring justice anywhere God’s people raise their voices. It will show compassion anywhere God’s people bind the wounds of the brokenhearted. It will be a sign and seal of God’s grace everywhere and anywhere that God’s people remember and share the gift they have been given.

To the Hebrew way of thinking, the heart is not the seat of the emotions, but rather the stronghold of the will. To the Hebrew way of thinking, when the heart is transformed, it is not overwhelmed with romance, warm fuzzies, empathy, or even

compassion, but rather decisiveness, fortitude, and perseverance. It is rather how we today think of the mind, and the determination of making up our minds about something. As Flora likes to say about me when I get an idea in my head, I have it “entre seja y seja,” between the eyes, or the eyebrows more specifically, but most definitely in my hard little head. When our heart is captured by God, when the law of the Lord is written on our hearts, it means that we are resolved to do what God calls us to do, and how God calls us to do it, and when God calls us to do it, and for whom God calls us to do it. The law of the Lord, written on our hearts, overwrites the sin written there with an iron pen, and engraved with a diamond point. The past is dead and gone, replaced with a future bright with possibilities, through no effort of our own.

In a sense, the new covenant is this, that being obedient to God, and living into the fullness of God’s love and grace, will not depend on our efforts, but on God’s effort; not on our compassion, but on God’s; not on our weakness, but on God’s strength. The exiles to whom Jeremiah is writing had done nothing to deserve this sudden consolation, this unexpected good news about a future time. There was no repentance, no change of heart, no faithlessness transformed into faithfulness. If anything, they were at their lowest point, unable to do anything beyond lament their situation. And yet God tells them that the days are coming when the unfaithfulness they formerly practiced will become impossible to practice, that it will be a memory as distant as the Ark of the Covenant that would

no longer be needed, nor remembered. “They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.”

The verb “to know,” in Hebrew, means more than to have learned something. It means, rather, to have intimacy with, as it is used to describe the sexual intimacy between husband and wife. It is to become acquainted with another to so great a degree that the two become one flesh. Before the exile, God’s people may have known the Commandments written on tablets, known them in the sense that perhaps we might be able to recite them today, and maybe even followed them to the best of their ability. But after the exile they will know them in the Biblical sense, become one with them, and rely on God to help them keep the law of the Lord, that perfect, soul-reviving, sweet honey-tasting, life-giving law of the Lord. Their living out of the commandments will now come from the inside out, because God is doing a new thing. In the old days, after they had been led out of slavery in Egypt, the Covenant God made with them was one from the outside in; the gift of the land and a secure future was designed to help create a solid and sustainable community of faith and integrity out of a band of bedraggled Bedouins. In the old days they needed that foundation carved in stone. But the new Covenant is for new times, different times, times in which a community of faith and integrity will build a kingdom that has a secure future. And that faith and integrity will come from the law found written on the hearts of God’s people. The world will be transformed from the inside out, beginning with you and me.

Some of you know that the only television show I make sure to watch each week is *The Biggest Loser*, a reality show in which the contestants compete to see who can lose the highest percentage of their weight during the course of the show, a contestant a week being eliminated until the final three are weighed in to see who has claimed the season's prize as "The Biggest Loser." The transformations of most of the contestants are truly remarkable, even if it is a rather manufactured environment. Last season's winner lost more than fifty percent of his body weight, a weight which began at 519 pounds. If you've watched the show, you know how much time these people spend working out in the gym, and learning how to eat right and avoid the temptations they will face once they are back in "the real world." But if you've watched the show, you will also know that the transformation that really matters in the end is in muscle on the inside, not the fat on the outside. It is when their hearts are transformed that their bodies follow suit. It begins with a doctor's assessment that leads to an intimate knowledge that their obesity has life-threatening consequences, an intimate knowledge that impacts the heart in that Hebrew sense. They become determined to change when they see just how close they are to death. But as important as that is, it is not what really transforms them. What really makes the difference, what really helps the pounds come off when it is harder and harder for the pounds to come off, is when they begin to come to terms with how they ended up obese in the first place, and the price they have paid for keeping it all stuffed inside. It is then that you see that the

transformation of their bodies begins from the inside out, and their determination to succeed multiplies exponentially. The hope of a better life is then written on their hearts, rather than just on the motivational posters on the gymnasium walls, and that makes all the difference.

It's an imperfect example I know, but one which I hope will help you capture what God is trying to tell us through Jeremiah, that the life and the change we seek in our own lives, and in our communities comes from God's gift, and from the inside out. We can labor on our own our whole lives and lose a few pounds, or get a couple of promotions, or get some laws enacted, or maybe even reconcile a few relationships. But with God's help, with an intimate knowledge of that perfect, soul-reviving, sweet honey-tasting, life-giving law of the Lord, we can not just lose weight but keep it off, we can work not just to put food on the table but to feed the hungry in our communities, we can not only get some laws enacted, but bring an end to unjust regimes like Jim Crow and Apartheid, and we can reconcile not only a few relationships, but be reconciled with the whole world. That is the new covenant. Let us celebrate it. Amen.