

Chiseled in Stone to Written on the Heart
Jeremiah 31: 31-34 and John 12: 20-33
March 21, 2021...5th Sunday of Lent
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

A healthy human being has been defined as one who can feel the whole range of emotions, facing reality when it is difficult and painful, as well as when it is happy and hopeful. If that is true, then the prophet Jeremiah was remarkably healthy because the book of Jeremiah encompasses the full range of human experience, as well as the way people make sense of those experiences spiritually.

For instance, at one point, the prophet speaks of God as a loving parent; at another an enemy ready to wipe Israel off the map. This look into human emotion is why our Old Testament seminary professor started class with this: Are you ready for a little Jeremiah (Hebrew); strap on your seat belts, it's gonna be wild ride!

This roller-coaster ride of emotion eventually settles into a more compassionate ride when we reach chapter 30 as Jeremiah describes God as a faithful husband filled with compassion for an unfaithful wife, Israel. Then today we hear one of the most beautiful assurances of God's forgiveness with the promise to never break the covenant relationship with his people. These are not mere words spoken with the mouth, Jeremiah says, these are words of promise written upon our hearts that forever we belong to God. That is powerful! Our sins are forgiven!

But our human selves have a hard time of letting go the sin or the guilt of it and embracing the joyful freedom that forgiveness brings us. Perhaps we can take a cue from a ten-year old boy who wanted to be a preacher when we grew older.

When the family cat passed away, he conducted a funeral complete with the shoebox resting place; however, when the cat's tail would not fit in the fit, he cut a hole in the lid allowing the furry tail to stick out. When the sermon given, into a shallow grave the cat was placed—all but the tail which kept poking through the earth. For days this happened. Baffled, the boy would pull the cat up by the tail and relocate it. Eventually the tail fell off and the boy had to let go. Finally the body remained buried and he could go about the “living things” of life.

Are not our sins like that, the prophet Jeremiah might say to us? We confess them, but continue to drag them around, even though God considers the ugly things buried once and for all. Are there things in our lives that we need to leave buried in order to more fully living into the joy of God's forgiveness, forgiving self and forgiving others.

We know human sin is with us, but we have choices. We can live with sin's consequences by continually digging them up, causing us to control us instead of resting in the promise that God forgives and buries our sins. The more sin buried away, the more joy we find in living, especially in our hearts.

Jeremiah was able to sense what was in the heart of the Israelites, or as John might say, Jeremiah could “see and understand” what was happening to the people. Their seemingly hopeless human

situation was causing them to lose hope in God, and the prophet was reminding them it did not have to be that way. This seeing that John speaks of is about claiming something that is revealed, and in the case of Jeremiah's story, it is claiming the promise that we always belong to God.

Hearing and believing that was crucial to the faith of the Israelites during Jeremiah's time. They were surrounded by enemies, had witnessed the destruction of the temple and faced captivity in Babylon. But hearing Jeremiah's sometimes harsh words was painful. One moment he proclaims the people are getting what they deserve, and in the next breath, voice God's word of hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.

That is where we find Jeremiah's story today, bringing hope to the heart. This "full-range emotion book" cautions us that we need to give attention to the whole of God's Word. It would be easy in Jeremiah to hear only the doom and gloom if we did not fully read it and discover God's promise of hope. The whole of scripture is about God's living message of hope through Jesus to save, not condemn the world.

There is a little Jeremiah in many of us I suspect. At some point we can be yelling to God for help and the next yelling at God with: Why? Why not? What if? Why now?

When our human emotions have run their course and we are exhausted, the comforting message from Jeremiah is the promise that it is God's love that holds and heals our hearts. Just as God knows the whole story of our lives, we are called to know God's story too, all of it.

To do that, we cannot pick what we want and do not want to hear. Proof-texting is about pulling a single scriptural passage or story from the whole of God's story. It is akin to reading only part of a book when we need the beginning, ending and all between for it to make sense.

I have told you about growing up memorizing Bible verses. Learning how to navigate the pages at an early age gave me the confidence to keep exploring what scripture. The Girls in Action program applauded the learning of scripture by moving you up the royal ladder. From Lady-in-Waiting, Princess, then Queen, the ultimate place of honor, complete with a crowning ceremony. In my mom-made crushed velvet purple formal and matching velvet choker around my neck, I was set for the ceremony. All was well until my curly hair would not cooperate and I ended up with two very informal dog-ears tied with purple yarn to try to tame it. Oh what preteen girls do! Holding my head high, the crown was placed on my head, and immediately fell off. The two dog-ears were so high the crown could not sit on my head!

I am grateful that the purple-velvet dress and dog-ear days are gone, but even more so, I am grateful that not gone are the scriptures that will forever remain written on my heart. The point, while I know the whole of God's story, I also know particular scriptures and stories that comfort me or challenge me, and I would never trade memorizing verses just because I did not fully understand as a child. As Jeremiah and John would say, "seeing" and understanding come as our faith matures. Jeremiah is reminding us that the Word of the Lord is not simply words pulled from our memory bank, they are God's love etched upon our hearts from the beginning of time.

Then along comes John's gospel telling us that God's love is like a seed that has to sprout and grow so much so that it becomes a living part of who we are. After the deep freeze we just experienced, I was not sure what would happen with living things. Will the bluebonnets, red Indian paintbrushes and yellow daffodils, come to life, pushing through the ground that has been its winter home? I did have to wait long, though. On our walks, Gary and I are seeing signs of life everywhere, trees budding. Birds building nests. Baby calves running in the pastures. New life. That is the hope that God has given us in the new covenant, in Jesus Christ...new life.

What are the things that are inscribed on your heart? What instructions from God have curled up around your bones and made you strong? What scriptures and stories are keys to the memories that are the foundations of your life and faith life?

I think we keep reading these prophecies of Jeremiah thousands of years after they were written, because we know something about having words written on our hearts, words so deeply embedded in our behavior that they might as well be the blood that pumps through our veins.

What words will you carry into a new world, a new stage of life, new relationships? We know the words of the Lord are etched into our hearts, we can choose to pass them on or not.

From the hard and hopeless places of life within and around us, the people of Jeremiah's time, Jesus' time, our time, we learn again and again that God breaks through by the power of the life-changing Spirit and uses us to bring God's love written upon our hearts to life again and to new life.

Has this past year changed us? I suspect so. But not changed is God's covenant promise to love us. And God's love can change everything when we allow ourselves to become like plants that die and re-seed in order to grow into the something more that God is calling us to be. And God sent Jesus, the new covenant, to show us how to be all we were created to be by bringing commandments, chiseled in stone, to life as love written upon our hearts for all of God's people.