

Sunday, March 18, 2018  
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Central Presbyterian Church  
Eugene, Oregon



A Sermon preached by  
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## Writing On The Heart

Jeremiah 31:31-35

One thing I've learned since completing my theological degree nearly 35 years ago, is that study of the law of God, as if it were something that we could actually dissect and "figure out" like a scientific equation, and living the law from your heart, are quite different. To be intentional about living daily in the presence of the Holy, to practice the law from the heart, looks and feels quite different than being confident that you know what the law says. There are countless stories about this in the New Testament. Jesus healing on the Sabbath. The Pharisees interpreted it as breaking the law and Jesus as fulfilling the law. The rich man who asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life and was asked by Jesus "What is written in the law." He answered correctly – Love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus then challenged him to live it by giving away what he had and giving to the poor. In the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus asks who was right, the Pharisee and Scribe, teachers of the law who passed by on the other side or the Samaritan who was an outsider to the faith but stopped to help the man by the side of the road half dead. I think you remember the answer to that question.

The ability to recognize and pay attention to God's presence in your heart, unlike being knowledgeable about the Law, can be a compelling reason to get out of bed in the morning even when things in the world are a mess.

I have to be honest: Sometimes when I sit down to write a sermon or craft a devotion and find myself staring at the blank, white computer screen before me, there's this cynical voice in my head that reminds me I have absolutely nothing new or wise or intelligent to offer. It happens more often than any reasonable preacher should admit out loud. But, really, what is there to say about love or hope or faith that has not already been said? How do you create a new clever spin on God, so that maybe this time, people will leap out of their seats, energized for the cause of justice and righteousness in gratitude for a loving Creator who has made us in the Divine image and has given us all this? Where are the words? What is there left to say?

And, then, just as there are those dire, doubtful moments, there are other times when I am absolutely convinced that the messages of love and hope and faith we proclaim in the church, or better yet, proclaim as the church, are the most important words there are: that

nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God; that God so loved the world; that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but all of us are one in Christ Jesus. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And at such moments, I begin to feel inside myself the words of Paul, that "though I may see things dimly and only in part," from my own limited experience or perspective, someday... "someday I will fully know as I am fully known." Experiences like that inspire and sustain me. And the more intentional and disciplined I am living in the presence of God the more regular are these experiences of faith, hope and love which really do abide. And when we can find and form the vocabulary and courage to speak about such things it really does have the power to change us and to change the world.

I'd like to say that these insightful experiences happen often in worship, but not always. Sometimes these fleeting moments of certitude happen when I least expect it, in places and circumstances many would think odd. But I take them when they come and I suspect you do too. They do have a way of carrying us through until the next time we feel the winds of the Holy Spirit blow through us.

"This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel," says the Lord: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts."

This hopeful passage in Jeremiah is spoken at a time when one would hardly expect such definitive assurance of God's abiding presence. The time is 587 BCE, or roughly

600 years before the birth of Jesus. The Babylonians have conquered the kingdom of Judah and by force removed from them the two clearest symbols that the Jewish people had of their God: the temple in Jerusalem, destroyed, and their king, Zedekiah, taken away in chains. This doesn't seem like the appropriate time to be speaking of the nearness of God.

For those of us who are anxious about the political scene in the United States and around the world we need to carefully listen to these words of hope from Jeremiah. Week after week, when it seems like nothing is going right and you feel like everything is stacking up against us, we need to hear the covenant words:

*"The days are surely coming... 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 days are coming... I will make covenant 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. <sup>34</sup>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.*

Smackdab in the middle of misery, it never fails, there's that one fellow who walks up to you and says, smugly, "But God is always faithful," and you sort of want to smack him? Because, I'm sorry, it just doesn't feel like that right now. That annoying guy has a name. It's Jeremiah.

What Jeremiah, the prophet, wanted his people to know and remember in one of their greatest moments of destitution is that God's faithfulness remains intact, even when the ways we've recognized God in the past don't necessarily correspond with our current reality. Despite our unfaithfulness, our rebellion, our violence toward one another and creation, God has not and will not abandon us. That's how good God really is.

If you listen carefully, though, Jeremiah doesn't say that God has already written this covenant on our hearts, but instead that is what God intends to do. The days are surely coming, Jeremiah says. They're on their way. We're leaning into them. This is what God desires, and it would serve us well to start living this way, with God in our house and in our hearts.

There are some who read this prophecy and wonder if God's gotten a bit tired of the whole free will thing, that maybe what God has in mind is some kind of computer chip implanted in our brains so that, finally, we will have no other choice but to be faithful and obedient to God's ways. After all, that law will be within us; it will be written on our hearts. We'll all know God because we won't have any other choice.

I don't buy into that interpretation. Because what God wants and has always wanted is not to control us, but to be with us, to comfort and challenge and encourage us when we need it most. Isn't that the history of God, who desires, above all else, a relationship. And isn't that our story as well? Because during the roughest times, just when every reasonable

expectation would have us abandoning the idea of God altogether--like you might have expected from the Israelites back in Jeremiah's day--it seems, somehow, we cling to God all the more closely. It's almost counter-intuitive, but that is the way it works.

In these days of earthquakes, floods, and fires, literal and political – times when our anxiety is high and our values and behavior are in crisis I marvel at how people of faith and values seem more robust than ever -- The women's marches, the resistance to self-interested governing, neighbors helping neighbors to recover from the unnatural disasters of fire and flood-- the new intensity in churches and communities to solve the problems of hunger, homelessness and poverty, and the insistence of health care for all. "How is this possible?" How is it that, rather than turning in on ourselves with the survival instinct, people are reaching out to help their neighbors? It's as if God's love really is written within them--on their hearts. During times of comfort and stability we often take all our blessings for granted. In times of crisis we dig deep where we find written on our hearts the impulse to love, the seeds of faith, the image of God in which we were created.

The laws of God have been studied, interpreted and practiced, for generations and generations. The law reveals God's loving will for humankind and God's eternal covenant with all creation, and it is holy, precious, and beautiful.

And in the life of Jesus, we discover the lengths to which God will go to write this law,

this love, on our hearts, a redeeming love that shows us how bold and selfless God's love can be, a crucified love that reveals the depth of pain God will endure to reach and save us, a resurrected love that cannot be swallowed up by any temporary setback or disappointment, not even death itself, an eternal love that knows no earthly or heavenly end.

We are not alone. We are never alone. For we have a God who comes to us in human form, who intervenes in the course of human history, who reveals to us a Presence that refuses to let us go.

That is what God is writing within you. God is writing that, right now, on your heart.