

“I Will Make a New Covenant”

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Is it even possible for us to lead godly lives? I think the reason why I love this prophecy of hope from Jeremiah is that even after all his prophecy of judgment leading up to these words, Jeremiah still believes that we can live godly lives, if we are willing to accept God’s help.

Let me share a little of the history behind this prophecy in Jeremiah 31.

Around 1,000 B.C., Israel was united under Kings David and Solomon. During the period of Solomon’s Rehoboam’s reign, the northern kingdom of Israel separated itself from the southern kingdom of Judah which included Jerusalem. The northern kingdom falls to Assyria in 721 B.C. Jeremiah has prophesied that Israel is being judged by God for breaking their covenant with God by turning to other gods and by failing to love God and neighbor. In the midst of being judged for breaking their covenant with God, Jeremiah preaches a prophecy of hope when he preaches in verse 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.”

Verse 31 is the only reference to a “new covenant” in the Old Testament. But what is truly new about this covenant? After all, God had been establishing and renewing covenants since ancient times.

God established a covenant with humanity and all creation in Genesis 9. . .

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing

my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹²God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." ¹⁷God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

God established a covenant Abraham promising him land and many descendants.

God established a conditional covenant with Israel through Moses at Mt. Sinai. God had delivered Israel out of slavery and through they sea, but Israel was expected to follow the commandments associated with the covenant. They would be blessed for keeping the terms of the covenant, but it would be to their peril to break them. And break them they did – over and over again God, like a loving parent, would have to try something new in teaching his children discipline,

obedience, and love. In verse 32, Jeremiah describes the need for change.

“It 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.”

Verses 33-34 show how the new covenant will differ . . . 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.

God will write the law on our hearts – it will become internalized and individualized. Our covenant relationships with God will become a part of who we are and our sins will be forgiven.

This Old Testament prophecy of hope is fulfilled in the Good Friday blood of Jesus Christ that is internalized and individualized every time we swallow and drink the body and blood of Holy Communion with Christ. As Jesus blesses the bread and wine before his last supper, he says, “This is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins.”

In Jesus Christ, God writes his new covenant on our hearts. Psalm 40:8 says, “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

Psalm 51:10 says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and

right spirit within me.”

God does it. God writes it on our hearts. God puts his law within our hearts. God creates in us a new heart. With God’s help, it is possible for us to live a godly life – loving God and one another with all our heart.

One way that God does it is by sending saints into our life who help to shape and mold our hearts into loving, disciplined, and forgiving hearts. Last month, as I was reading the Plain Dealer sports page, I noticed a picture of a woman who looked familiar. As I began to read the article written by Terry Pluto about Lutheran West’s girls basketball coach, Karen Wittrock, I realized I remembered her from my high school days at Buckeye when the Lutheran West girls would come to our gym for basketball games. She was a young, petite woman who knew how to coach basketball and commanded your respect. Karen is a woman sent into many young people’s lives to help shape and mold them into loving, disciplined, and forgiving followers of Christ. I share with you part of Terry Pluto’s article But when you came to Lutheran West in 1967, there were a few tears of frustration and you had moments when you sensed you were trying to squeeze blood out of a rock.

You were a student teacher from Concordia University, and Lutheran West had no sports for girls. You started the basketball program, only they would not let you practice in the Main Gym. You had 10 girls work out in the school hallways, dribbling up and down, passing back and forth -- and sometimes pretending to shoot layups, only not throwing the ball up too high, don't want to break the light

fixtures on the ceiling.

You think about all the bake sales and car washes, raising money to be able to rent practice time at a local recreation center, along with having to pay for equipment and uniforms. The school said there was no money in the budget back in the late 1960s.

You think about how the first few years, girls played 6-on-6, with two of the players never allowed to cross half-court -- they had to stay back, perpetually on defense.

You think about being far more determined than resentful. You think about how through prayer, you believed if your program was good enough, they'd let you in the gym, they'd help pay for equipment and uniforms, and how it really did happen. By 1976, when your team went to the state finals and finished as runner-up, the blessing came in the form of a budget and gym time.

In some ways, you long for the earlier era of girls athletics, when you encouraged your students to try different sports. You also started the field hockey, the softball and the track programs for girls. Now, you think there is too much pressure on girls to pick one sport.

You were a coach who never received a technical foul in 41 years. You didn't believe in bouncing off the bench, stomping feet, screaming at officials. You also noticed fans expected it. In your last few years, you did spend more time standing

during games, but it was mostly to encourage your players.

You remember a time when the home team was a true host, supplying the visiting coaches and players with oranges, towels and water during the games, then the players and coaches from both teams getting together afterward for snacks and soft drinks. That was a product of those early years of girls basketball, when you seldom had home games.

Now, the gym is named after you.

Still, hard to believe.

An Avon Lake resident, you think about growing up in Gravois Mills, Mo., population 33 at the time. You spent much of your first seven years living with your grandparents in a log cabin. For real. With no running water. No electricity. You didn't know you were supposed to feel deprived, because you weren't the only one living with that.

You learned to work hard, to go to church, to come home and do your homework first, then the chores, then go outside and play. Your office is cluttered with papers and notebooks and shoes and shirts and Post-it notes and clipboards with schedules -- you learned never to throw out anything, one day you may need it.

Taped to your computer are some Bible verses. There is: "Stand firm and

watch for the Lord's deliverance" from Exodus 14:13. How many times in your life did you have to remind yourself of that?

Especially in 2005 when you were diagnosed with ovarian cancer. They told you it was bad, but it was Stage 2 with a 60 percent survival rate. The surgery was successful, the cancer did not appear to spread. Not long after that, you were on a camping trip, you had a dream where you were covered in a white light, like a blanket. You sensed something like angels covering you, and then you heard a voice: "You will be healed."

Your faith is deep, but you don't hear the voice of God like that. You don't have dreams like that. You think of another verse on your computer, Psalm 46:10: "Be still and know I am God." You don't worry about anyone believing your story, you know it's real.

Yes, you lost weight, lost hair, lost energy thanks to chemotherapy. But you never lost hope. Your faith may have been rocked a bit, but never crumbled. You had people praying, people caring, people helping. You felt God more powerfully through your pain than any time in your life. But over and over, you heard "You will be healed." It was Oct. 6, 2005, and you marked that as the day you were freed from cancer.

Now, it's nearly four years later. You think about your life, how part of you wanted a family, but how St. Paul praised the single life in one of his letters. You

think about all the kids you have taught, and how you have taught and coached some of their kids. They have been your family.

You think about your golf team, all boys, and how you've enjoyed coaching males for the past 12 years. You think about how you never expected to spend 41 years at Lutheran West, but when offered chances to coach at Ashland University and Valparaiso in the 1980s, you just couldn't leave.

You walk into the Main Gym. . . . oops, The Rock. . . . every morning and you think God must not be done with you yet, that you have another day, now make the most of it.

Is it possible for us to lead godly lives? We can lead godly lives if we are willing to accept God's help. We can lead godly lives when God writes it on our hearts, when God puts his law within our hearts and creates in us a new heart. With God's help, it is possible for us to lead a godly life, loving God and one another with all our heart.

May the peace of God . . .

#801 - Change My Heart, O God.