

5 Lent 2003  
"New Covenant, New Heart, New World"  
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**Holy Week is near.** The week that is the heart and soul of the Christian year is just a couple weeks away. This is the week that began with cries of 'hosanna' as Jesus entered Jerusalem, but ended with shouts of 'crucify,' as Pilate offered him to the mob. In Holy Week we relive the 2000-year-old story of Jesus' final, climactic week in Jerusalem.

It's the week of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection from the dead, in which he... **SAVED THE WORLD**, rescued the human race, redeemed the earth. It's the week that Jesus, as the author of the book of Hebrews describes him in this morning's epistle, "became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him."

I guess you could say that Holy Week makes it blatantly obvious to the most casual observer that Christianity is NOT a religion of ethics and shining ideals and human aspirations. Rather, **it's a religion of salvation** that brings a new power into the world that changes us and transforms the whole world.

That's what's envisioned in our Old Testament this morning. Jeremiah looks forward to the future. "The days are surely coming says the Lord when **I will make a new covenant** with the house of Israel." Jeremiah offers this promise to the remnant of Israel living in captivity in Babylon.

We saw them there last week in 2 Chronicles in the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, where our military is now fighting. The people of Israel are in Mesopotamia because of their chronic failure to uphold the covenant they made with God on Mt Sinai with Moses.

The covenant was a contract, an agreement that established their relationship with God, in which God and his people pledged themselves to each other, like in marriage. God promised to give Israel the land, to make them prosperous and to be near to them, in their midst. The people pledged to love God and love each other in the ways codified in the Ten Commandments, which were written to last on tablets of stone.

**But Israel had a hard time upholding their side of the relationship.** They broke all their promises to God. They were unfaithful, as though they committed adultery. And now they're in exile, divorced and cast off.

But there's a glimmer of hope for the future and Jeremiah kindles that hope. God has not forgotten his people in exile, for "The days are surely coming says the Lord when I will make a **NEW** covenant with the house of Israel." There's a re-marriage planned.

In this future covenant the law will no longer be written on stone tablets, beckoning obedience, but **it will be written on the heart, bringing change and inspiring love and fidelity.** It will establish a more intimate relationship with God. "I will be their God and they shall be my people. They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest and I will forgive their sin."

And our gospel announces that the time of the new covenant has arrived. **Jesus announces that, "the hour has come."** "The hour has come for Son of Man to be glorified."

OK. What's he talking about? Jesus speaks very cryptically here and thankfully, John cuts to the choice and explains it for us. **Jesus is talking about his death.** "I will be lifted up from the earth." He's describing crucifixion, being "lifted up" on a cross, hung on nails. Crucifixion was a favorite Roman mode of execution and was very familiar to people back then. It was a hideous, lingering agony.

But why would Jesus describe such a death as being "glorified"? It's a strange idea of glory, isn't it? What's he talking about? Well, let's see. Or maybe we should say, *let's SEED*, because Jesus tells a little parable about **a little seed being buried in the earth.** It's a *corny* little story about a kernel of corn that dies ignominiously in the dirt.

But is that bad? No, it's not because we know that when the kernel dies it grows into something else much more than that that little seed. It becomes a plant that bears much fruit. And that fruit produces many other seeds, that fall into the ground and die and become fruitful plants that bear more seeds that fall into the ground and die and grow into plants that bear more seeds...on and on. One seed ultimately becomes a whole harvest.

That's how Jesus describes his death. So you can see the glory in it. And Jesus describes what kind of fruit *his death* will bear. "When I am lifted up from the earth **I will draw all people to himself.**" He will "become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." He will start something on earth that will in time draw EVERYONE in.

Yet as glorious as this vision is, Jesus is very anxious about it and John records Jesus' inner dialogue about it. "And now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, 'Father save me from this hour?'" You can certainly understand why Jesus would want to avoid such a hideous death.

**So now he has a choice.** Should I stay or should I go? Should I live or should I die? Should I ask God to save me from this? "No, it is for THIS reason that I have come to this hour!" Then Jesus takes the leap. "Father, glorify your name." Faced with the choice of HIS WILL, which is self preservation, or GODS WILL, which is glorification, Jesus says "not my will but thy will be done."

**Now here's the rub. Jesus confronts US with the same choice.** "Whoever serves me will follow me and where I am, there will my servant be also." Jesus bids us join him in death. He invites us to let go and allow God to bring forth our true potential. "Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies *it remains just a single grain*, but IF IT DIES it bears much fruit."

Jesus is calling us to die and it's a message we've heard this several time in Lent. Maybe it's getting a little old! **But hopefully it's also getting through.** We must give our lives, our selves, our souls and bodies to God. We must give to God all that is most precious to us so that we love HIM more than anything else, more than all the other idols we worship and serve.

And it's hard, isn't it? It's hard giving up and letting go, releasing those things we covet and envy and work for and ruthlessly guard and conceal. It's hard entrusting ourselves and all our life to God. So we say with Jesus, "my heart is troubled!" And **we pray for the help that is ours in the New Covenant** that we have with Jesus.

This covenant PROMISES a change of heart, inner transformation and strength, the law written on our hearts. And that's exactly what we prayed for in our collect this morning. Did you hear it? "Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace **to love what you command and desire what you promise**...that our hearts may be fixed where true joys are to be found."

We ask God to write his will on our hearts so we want what he wants. And the good news this morning is that HE DOES! IT WORKS because at the heart of the New Covenant is Jesus' glorious death and resurrection. **As we join him there we share in it.** "Where I am, there will my servant be also." This is our relationship with Jesus. It's that intimate and close. It changes us. Our desires and wills are transformed.

And that's where we become fruitful, like that single seed that dies and bears much fruit, that produces many other seeds, that fall into the ground and die and become fruitful plants that bear more seeds that fall into the ground and die and grow into plants that bear more seeds...on and on.

**It's the principle of multiplication** that began when Jesus offered his life to God and was lifted up on the cross. It has continued through 2000 years of history to and THROUGH us today. This is how Jesus is drawing all people to himself. AMEN