

## **The Promise of New Life** (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33)

In 1845, an expedition left England amid great fanfare. Sir John Franklin and 138 men set sail in two ships to find the Northwest Passage from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean across the high Canadian Arctic. They thought that they would be gone for two to three years. And yet, expecting to be gone for two to three years, traveling across the high Canadian Arctic, this is what they took with them: a twelve-day supply of coal; their regular Navy uniforms and overcoats; an organ that played 50 tunes; a 12-hundred-volume library; heavy china place settings; cut glass goblets; and heavy sterling silver flatware, engraved with the initials of the officers' family crests. A British whaling captain saw them a few months later, in Lancaster Sound, but he was the last person to see them alive. For 20 years, their well-preserved bodies were found in the frozen Arctic sea by other British sailors.

Apparently the ship froze in the ice, and since they were running out of supplies, the men began walking across the ice in search of help. Their way was slow, though, because they dragged with them a lifeboat containing the organ, some books, and some of the heavy china and sterling silver flatware. They were so intent on keeping their old ways that they lost their lives.

In our Old Testament lesson for today, the Israelites were pretty much the same. The prophets had told them that they needed to leave behind their old ways—that the old ways would kill them. But the Israelites wouldn't do this. They stubbornly and foolishly held onto their worship of foreign gods and their oppression of one another for riches and power. Thus they lost their lives as they had known them. They were overrun by a foreign power, losing their freedom, their land, and their temple. Nonetheless, our loving God would not leave them to the death they had brought upon themselves by breaking the covenant he had made with them on Mount Sinai. God sent the Prophet Jeremiah to offer them a word of hope.

Jeremiah told the Israelites that God loved them and thus promised to enter into a new covenant with them. The new covenant would not be like the old covenant. The old covenant was written on tablets of stone and externally forced on people by such authorities as scribes, teachers, rulers of the synagogues. In contrast, the new covenant would be written on each individual's heart and be between each individual and God. God said, "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" (Jeremiah 31:33). The new covenant would be based on a personal relationship with God. God said, "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...for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).

With Jesus, God fulfilled his promise of a new covenant. With Jesus, God showed his

true person, revealing the depth and breadth of the amazing love he has for each one of us.

I recently read about a primitive tribe that meets once each year for a reunion and to arrange marriages. One year, the men who had gathered began laughing and talking about a young man who had paid 10 goats to get to marry a certain young woman. The men were laughing at the foolishness of the young man, because they did not think that this particular woman was worth one goat, let alone 10! On the day of the wedding though, when the bride appeared, they were shocked. The woman they had always considered so plain, so undesirable had become the most beautiful woman they'd ever seen! You see, she had actually changed, from the inside out, when she felt loved so much that a young man was willing to make the sacrifice of 10 goats for her! When she saw herself in his eyes, when she realized that he loved her so much, she changed from the inside out, her life changed, and she became the person she never thought she'd become. Similarly, in revealing his great love for us, God begins the amazing process of writing his law of love upon our hearts, thus changing our hearts, changing us, so that we too can become more than we've been.

Christian author Walter Wangerin shared a powerful story called "Matthew, Seven, Eight, and Nine" about how he tried to change his son for the better. Wangerin's son Matthew kept stealing comic books! The father tried laying down the law, but nothing seemed to reach Matthew. Finally, in desperation, the father did something he never imagined he'd do: he spanked his son. But afterward, the father was so upset that he left the room and cried. After pulling himself back together, he went to Matthew and hugged him. A number of years later, Matthew and his mother were remembering "the good ol' days," when Matthew brought up the time he kept stealing comic books. "And you know why I finally stopped?" he asked. "Sure," she said, "Because Dad finally spanked you." "No!" replied Matthew, "I stopped because Dad cried." Similarly, knowing that our sinning grieves our Heavenly Father, we want to change for him. We want to be the persons he wants us to be.

When Jesus entered the Holy City of Jerusalem on what we think of as Palm Sunday, his public ministry was coming to an end. But his ministry had drawn all sorts of people to God--not only men but also women, not only saints but also sinners, not only Jews but also Gentiles. According to the Gospel Writer John, the Pharisees said, "Look, the world has gone after him," and John illustrated this truth with a little aside about two Greeks approaching the disciple Philip about how they too could draw near to Jesus. Thus, at this point in his ministry, Jesus had the perfect opportunity to explain God's purpose in his own loving sacrificial life. So Jesus spoke up, comparing his life to a grain of wheat. Let me read it to you from Eugene Peterson's interpretation of this passage in The Message. Jesus said, "Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it

sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is, destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."□□

When our hearts are touched by God's love, when God's law of love is written on our hearts, we, like Jesus, are to let go of our old safe lives. Maybe that's why in Eastern Orthodox churches, on this fifth Sunday in Lent, they remember the story of St. Mary of Egypt. Mary was a prostitute who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, in the 400s. She was notorious for the sinful life she led. Mary had quite a reputation! But then Mary went with some other people to the Holy Land, and there, the group decided to visit the church in Jerusalem reported to be the place where Jesus was buried. But as Mary got near to the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, she felt as if there was a hand in front of her, stopping her from entering. And, with this, Mary understood that her sin was keeping her from drawing closer to God. So Mary spent the remaining 40 years of her life believing in Jesus and living the kind of life that she knew Jesus wanted her to live. She let go of her old sinful life. She buried her past life and embraced a new, joyful life of service and closeness with God, which produced many wonderful fruits.

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, we are called to examine ourselves to see if there are things, ideas, and perhaps even relationships that are killing us, keeping us from the new life that God has promised to those who trustingly, obediently, lovingly enter into the new covenant with him.

But letting go is difficult, and embracing something new is also not easy. And yet, any process of maturity requires death for new life, and none more so than maturing as a child of God.

With Jesus, God fulfilled his promise of a new covenant. With Jesus, God signed the new covenant. God sent Jesus to show us not only his true loving self but also what a life responding to his love looks like. It looks like Jesus. If we allow ourselves to be not only touched but also changed by God's love, our new lives should look like Jesus' life. We should be clearly recognizable as his followers, for, like him, we will be lovingly serving God and others--by building community, by showing compassion and forgiveness, and by working to bring justice, peace and hope. Amen.

--Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; March 29, 2009