

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
March 25, 2012**

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The Negotiating is Done!

- 1. Old Testament Negotiators**
- 2. Jeremiah's Burden**
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Hymns: 127 – 713 – 114(vv.6-7)

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” Jeremiah 31:31-34

A young traveler arrives in a foreign country for an innocent vacation. Yet, what started as a fun and new experience has turned to uncertainty and trepidation. This young man found himself in a situation where he should not have been and now he is in prison in a dark, foreign place. From the little that he can understand, the foreign government is not going to cut him any breaks. There will be no excuses accepted, there will be no mercy. He will be punished for his crime to the full extent. The fear of uncertainty grips this young man as he awaits his judgment in court. But that day never comes. Unbeknownst to him, someone has been working on his side; a negotiator from his own country has come to make peace between this young man and the foreign government. Into the midst of a tense situation, comes the tried and true solution – the negotiator who comes to make everything better.

That scene makes for a familiar script. You could probably look around and find some form of it in dozens of movies.

In many ways, that script got its start in the Old Testament, where it is played out over and over again in similar fashion. On one side of the table were the people of Israel. They were the lawbreakers. They were constantly in trouble and facing punishment for their wandering and godless ways. They routinely broke the agreement that had been established long ago during the time of Moses. On the other side of the table was God Almighty, the just and holy Judge. He set the standards and he would carry out the punishment to the full extent of his Law. There would be no mercy for people who so willfully and frequently abandoned what he had set up for their good. And in the middle of this tense situation came the Old Testament prophets. These men came from God with a stern message for the people. But they also went to God pleading on behalf of the people. For many, many years during the Old Testament, they were the bridge between the lawbreakers and the Lawmaker.

One of those OT negotiators is before us today. In fact, we know more about this prophet's work than any of the other prophets. Two books of the Bible are dedicated to his work. *Jeremiah*, which is the longest book of the Bible, and *Lamentations*, which records the personal laments of the prophet. From those books, we see that Jeremiah certainly worked in a difficult time. Whereas last week, we found the Israelites on the brink of entering the Promised Land, in *Jeremiah* we find them on the precipice of exile from that land. After approximately 800 years of back and forth, God was going to punish his people in a severe way. The Babylonians would come in and over the course of 20 years, they would ransack the Israelites. They would kill many in battle, they would carry many as captives back to Babylon, and in 586 B.C., they would destroy the great capital city of Jerusalem. The center of who these people were, as a country and as a religious group, would be taken away from them.

With that destruction in the imminent future, Jeremiah served as prophet for the people of Israel and for God. What a burden that weighed heavy upon Jeremiah's shoulders! On one hand, he was the mouth of God. He had to preach to the people about the destruction that was coming and he had to tell them very clearly that it was their fault that it was going to happen. On the other hand, he was a man of the people. Jeremiah had a true pastoral heart. He felt the pain of his people. Even when they did not, he ached for what had happened in their relationship with God. And so, even as he delivered the strong word of God's Law, Jeremiah also pleaded for God's

mercy to be on the people. Much of his recorded words show the strife that he felt as the man between God and the people. With all of that upon him, it is no wonder that Jeremiah is known as “the weeping prophet.” With a heavy heart, he would tirelessly go to God on behalf of the people.

At least, he would continue to do that until God said otherwise. And that otherwise is what we have recorded for us today in *Jeremiah* 31. These words are part of a bigger section in chapters 30-33 where God had a message for Jeremiah and the people: The negotiating is done! A new era was starting. No longer would the people bring continuous sacrifices to show their repentance to God. There would be no more of that daily ritual. No longer would the prophets need to come speaking God’s word to the people, or prophets need to come before God. The days of ignorance were over. A new covenant was going to be established and God was setting the terms. There would be no negotiation. For God, it was all about the bottom line.

Did you hear the bottom line that God is all about? **“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”** When it comes to the bottom line for God, it is not about himself, it is about his people. Everything that he was going to do according to this new agreement was for the sake of his people and their forgiveness. And with that in mind, there were very specific parameters set in place to ensure that the bottom line would be reached. When you think of a typical negotiation, no matter what the realm, there is usually give and take by both sides to enable an agreement to come into place. Yet, in this agreement between God and his people, it was not like that. This new covenant was completely one-sided. It was one-sided in who was doing the work, and it was one-sided in who would be receiving the benefits. God would be carrying out all the terms of this agreement. He would be completely and 100% responsible for making sure that the bottom line was met. And though he would be doing all the work, the people with whom God made this covenant would be the sole benefactors.

A typical agreement is also usually filled with conditions. If you hold up your end of the bargain, then I will hold up mine. If both sides cooperate, there is mutual benefit and happiness. Again, this new covenant was different. It was unconditional. As God spoke through his prophet Jeremiah, there were no if’s, and’s, or but’s. How different this was from the covenant of Exodus that God established with his people in the time of Moses! That was a covenant which was disobeyed and broken frequently. It was a covenant that they abused as soon as it was received. It was a covenant that they loathed as a heavy yoke around their necks. But here

was something that they would be glad to receive. Here was an agreement that could never threaten to weigh them down with restrictions or burdens. This was something that they would not ever want to forget.

And that is because this new covenant was all about the Gospel. It was all about that bottom line, forgiveness freely given with no conditions. Of course, this was not the first Gospel promise. God had made this Gospel covenant before with Adam and Eve, and with Noah and his sons, and with Abraham and his offspring. But the children of Israel had spent so many years focused on the covenant of the Law that many of them had forgotten about God’s covenant of grace, his covenant filled with promises. They had grown into thinking that their relationship with God was solely conditional. They had become so focused on obedience and sacrifice, that they had lost sight of the full picture, despaired and given up in their relationship with God. As they were heading into a dark time, they needed to be reminded that this covenant of God’s forgiveness was still there.

And it was not going anywhere. This new covenant would last to eternity. Because it was one-sided and unconditional, the people didn’t have to worry about it disappearing or failing. As they were carried off into Babylon, as they saw Jerusalem destroyed and the temple laid bare, they would see the pillars of the old covenant falling apart. But in the midst of their trouble, here was something to hold onto, an eternal covenant that could not fail.

And the wonderful news about this new covenant is that it was no longer just for the people of Israel. The deal God spoke about through Jeremiah is for you and me as well. As God spoke through his prophet, Jeremiah was not just serving as a mouthpiece to his fellow Israelites, he was speaking to all the world. He was not just giving a covenant that would serve as a source of hope during the Babylonian captivity, this covenant would give hope to people in every troublesome situation. This new covenant was universal. What God was going to carry out was a solution that would be for all people. God’s plan ensured that all the problems caused by sin have been settled already. We don’t have to do anything.

And yet, because of our nature, that is something we often have a tough time grasping. Our sinful nature gets us to doubt that everything could already be worked out. One of the easiest traps that we can fall into is thinking that with God – the relationship is conditional. You can see that attitude in our lives. How often aren’t our prayers to God filled with conditions? God, if only take away this struggle in my life, I’ll never complain about anything else. God, if you make this good thing

happen in my life, I'll be extra dedicated to you. How often don't we try to appease our guilty hearts with promises that we will make it up to God? I'm sorry I sinned in this way God, I promise if you keep anyone from finding out, I won't do it again. We have this natural thought that nothing is unconditional. Negotiating always needs to be done, a deal always needs to be made. Our reason tells us that the parameters of this new deal are too good to be true.

And those natural thoughts cement why we need the reminder of the Lenten season every year. Through what we are about to see during Holy Week, God is telling us very clearly, "The negotiating is done!" The deal that I have given to you is set. The results are sure. Nothing is required from you. There are no conditions in place. If you are unsure whether this can really be true, just look at what has happened. The blood of my Son seals the covenant. His words, "It is finished!" could not ring truer. If the numbers don't quite seem to add up, just look here and focus on the bottom line: Your wickedness has been forgiven, your sins have been forgotten, period.

It is in view of that bottom line that we find joy in the relationship between God and his people. Sin drives people away from God; it leads them to despise his Word which says that they deserve punishment. However, since we are brought back together with God through the blood of Christ, we no longer hide from God as someone who we have to answer to, we come close to him as our protector. Our view of his Word also changes. We understand the purpose of the Law in our lives, to keep us on the narrow way; we glory in the message of the Gospel as it shines in our lives. Through Christ, we know exactly who our God is. Through Christ, we know exactly what our God has done for us.

Everything about our situation has changed, because of that bottom line. God forgives our wickedness and he remembers our sins no more.

As you draw so close now on your journey to Calvary, take time to marvel at this new covenant that God carried out through his Son! Amen