

5 Lent
 March 18, 2018
 Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's
 Jeremiah 31:31-34
 Psalm 51:11-16
 Hebrews 5:5-10
 John 12:20-33

After the Israelites escaped Egypt, God isolated them from all the other nations. He gave them the Ten Commandments as a physical sign of the covenant that was now in place with God. But Israel lacked the resolve to keep the covenant. God led them for 40 years through the wilderness, (a very long route for the distance they really had to travel – have you seen a map of their route?). They were taken away from distractions to build community, to live into their relationship with each other and with God. Still they lacked the commitment to stay to the task.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote during the devastating time of Israel being defeated, dispersed, and held captive in Babylon, having very nearly lost their identity as God's people. Jeremiah tells them of God's plan for a new relationship with Israel. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts". So the covenant would be continued by God, even though the people had defaulted; and he would write his law on their heart, rather than on stone tablets.

Jeremiah was foretelling what we now know is offered through Christ. In the same way that God offered Israel new life through the exodus from Egypt, He offers us new life through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ.

Did you notice "the Greeks" mentioned in the Gospel reading? They seem to be mentioned almost by mistake. Andrew and Phillip brought some Greeks to Jesus, but then it isn't clear that they ever got to talk to Jesus. But actually they are central to the point of the story. The Greek language word used here for 'Greeks' means non-Jewish Gentiles; there is another word that would be used for Greek speaking Jews. These people had come to 'see' Jesus; being introduced through Andrew and Phillip. There is reason to believe that these Greeks wanted to become disciples too. Jesus understood this to mean that now "the world" was coming to him. His covenant was wider than for Israel alone. Jesus knew that his hour, his 'time' to make his identity fully known, had arrived. And through his glorification - God's promises will be fulfilled for the whole world. So Jesus tells the parable of the wheat seed to explain how his dying will result in the birth of a vast faith community (much fruit).

The growth of this faith community was only possible through Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus said, "If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him."

Jesus says that by our decision to follow and to serve him, we are fulfilling our covenant with God. But we need to decide to accept the offer (and I believe we need to make that decision anew, every day.)

You and I are an integral part of that faith community that results from the Spirit of Jesus being offered freely to the world. I use the phrase ‘faith community’ a lot because I believe that we are not only a parish; not only a community of Episcopalians. A faith community is bonded together by our belief in Jesus Christ; by our commitment to follow and serve him. This inter-relationship among God, Christ, and each of us is what our ‘new heart’ is about. This living inter-relationship is what God longs for all of humanity to experience. This “new heart” is about living beyond observance of written laws. It is about living out the tension between our consumer culture and God’s will; the tension between responding to violence and loving peace; the tension between resigning ourselves to the world as it is and instead giving God full reign over our lives. ‘Faith community’ is about living through these tensions as community; relying on God to guide us.

The point of this season of repentance (re-thinking) is that we need to identify distractions that we need to let go of, in order to experience the full power of God living in our hearts in this inter-related way. That was one reason for my giving you the pocket coins that say, ‘Behold the Lamb of God’; I wanted them to remind us of the One who carries the vision we share for a full life now, and an eternal life forever.

Through our decision to believe in Jesus Christ, and to serve and follow him, our relationship with God is made new. This is a daily decision, whether we are going to let Christ in. May God’s blessing on this faith community empower us individually and as a community to let Christ in, to be fully received by God, with God’s love imprinted on our hearts. And then let’s invite the people we know to join us in being led by the Heartbeat of God, beating in us.

Let us pray. Loving God, as the season of Lent draws to a close we see Jesus focus his sights on his Passion in Jerusalem. We begin to understand how his sacrifice there brought a new created order; how it changed your relationship with the whole world. May our Lenten reflections and sense of undeserving gratitude help us in our resolve of faith in your Son. In His name we pray. Amen.