

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
20 October 2019
Parish of St. John the Baptist, North Sydney, Nova Scotia

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104, II Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everliving God,
increase in us your gift of faith,
that forsaking what lies behind
and reaching out to what is before,
we may run the way of your commandments
and win the crown of everlasting joy;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

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I speak to you in the name of God: +Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Have you ever noticed in the Old Testament, how, whenever people fall short, God continues to try to reach them...how God, one way or the other, tries to get their attention...how God works to restore them...how God works to bring them into relationship with God?

This is what is happening today in the reading from the Prophet Jeremiah. In it, we find the central theme to the readings from Jeremiah that we've been hearing each Sunday this fall.

The central theme is this. God will do a new thing for the dispersed by building and. God claims this in order to establish an unending covenant with the people.

Recall that Jeremiah writes in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians. Recall, also, that mayhem followed the invasion with many having been killed while others dispersed in order to survive. In the midst of all of this, the Lord promises to *watch over them and to build and to plant*.

In the midst of all that is uncertain, hear God reaching out to the people, announcing the plan that will restore the people under a new covenant. *The days are surely coming when I will sow the house of Israel and Judah together. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors. But this covenant 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. ...they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest. ...I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

God is a faithful God and restoration is God's business. Notice that it is God that does the work of reaching out to the people, working in our hearts and in our lives in order to establish a lasting covenant between God and God's people. This new law will not be like the previous ones. It will be a new covenant that will bring about a new way of life.

Indeed, that new covenant is now with us in the gift of God's Son, Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus affirms this, saying, *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil* (Matthew 5:17).

Further, three of the four Gospels speak of this. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus speaks of the sharing of the wine at communion as an offering of the new covenant. It is the offering of wine, the spilling of his innocent blood poured out for all that is an indication that he is the new covenant. When we receive Jesus' offering, we become one with him. He in us and we in him. This is what God's new covenant does. God's covenant of Jesus unites us with him.

The Gospel of John speaks of Jesus as God's Word made flesh and dwelling among us. This Word was there with God from before the beginning and it continues. It will always be.

The Apostle Paul speaks of this further in the Second Letter to the Corinthians. Jesus, the new covenant from God, Paul's says, makes us all competent ministers because of the work of the Spirit within us. He writes that *such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life* (II Corinthians 3:4-6).

Because the Spirit gives life, we have the strength to press on. God is faithful. God gives us the will and the strength to face any challenge. God does this through the new covenant of Jesus, so that we may respond in faith to God's working in our hearts.

Thomas Chisholm knew what this was like first hand. Born in a Kentucky log cabin in the year 1866 to a poor farming family, Chisholm became a teacher when he was just sixteen years old. This presumably eliminated the family burden of feeding one more mouth. And, it gave Chisolm much needed employment and a means to develop his gifts away from the responsibility of his immediate family.

At the age of twenty-seven, Chisholm had an experience that led him to convert to commit his life to the Christian faith. Ten years later he answered the call to ordained ministry. But, he served for just a year and needed to leave active ministry because of poor health. He farmed for a time, and worked in insurance for the rest of his working life. He enjoyed a happy marriage and the company of the couple's two daughters.

No matter what Chisholm faced, regardless of challenges or easier times, he exercised his ministry by writing poetry. Some of his words would eventually be set to music.

One poem, in particular, is a deeply spiritual response to God's working in Chisholm's heart.

And, it is inspired by verses from Lamentations Chapter 3 which says: *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning;*

great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'

(3:22-24). These are the words that inspired Chisholm, in 1923, to write:

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father!
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;

Thou changest not; Thy compassions, they fail not:
As thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
join with all nature in manifold witness
to Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow—
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside.

Chorus

Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

Later, in 1941, Chisholm wrote that “My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.”

And so it goes. God continues to reach the world through the new covenant of Jesus. God reaches into our lives, one way or another. God works to get our attention. God works in our lives to restore us so that we might turn and proclaim that God is faithful.

Amen.

