



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**Written on Our Hearts**  
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

March 29, 2009  
*Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year B)*  
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Some years ago I was talking with a person in the hospital who the night before had thought they were dying. They were still anxious about that restless night as we talked. And then they told me: “You know, in those moments I kept saying over and over to myself what I’ve heard you tell us a million times: ‘In life and in death, we belong to God.’ And though it didn’t change my circumstances, I began to feel some sense of peace even in the midst of my fear.”

Experts have written countless articles describing what she discovered—that every preacher typically has only one sermon. And though it may take any number of different trajectories, if you listen closely, it almost always sounds the same basic theme. For some preachers it’s the need to repent; for others it’s the radical grace of God; for others it’s the need to spread the gospel; and for others it may even be the importance of being connected to a community of faith.

While I may have wanted to quibble with that person’s comment that I had said those words “a million times,” which is no doubt an exaggeration, there was no denying that they had listened well enough to discover what is one of the central themes of my preaching—if not the central theme. In life and in death, we belong to God. It’s the theme of remembering who we are as God’s beloved people, of living out of our baptismal identity, and what difference it makes for our lives and our living if we really took in what it means to be named as God’s beloved children in the waters of baptism.

When Jeremiah describes what God will do in establishing the new covenant—that God will write the law not on stone tablets but on our hearts—we see the same theme being sounded. But before that beautiful imagery about what God wants to write on our hearts can make any sense to us, we need to recognize and get rid of much that is already written there. Because, frankly, a lot of what’s already written on our hearts gets in the way of the larger truth God wants to write.

When was the last time you thought about your heart? What’s written there for you?

For some, there is that constant and nagging sentence that just keeps saying over and over and over “I am not worthy.” “I am not worthy to have this job. I am not worthy enough to be loved by another. I’m not worthy enough to serve on a committee or make a difference or even to matter to anyone at all.”

For others, it’s the exact opposite. What is written on their hearts is a resounding denial of any need of God. “I can do it on my own. I have no need of God. I have no need of anyone, for that matter. I’m doing fine on my own and I’ll continue making it on my own until the day I die.”

Still others have a single sentence on their hearts. “I am afraid.” And it can take a

number of directions—“I’m afraid my money won’t last through retirement. I’m afraid my children will make choices that will have life-altering consequences. I’m afraid the person I most need in my life is going to die or leave. I’m afraid the war will never end.” “I am afraid” is a powerful litany that is written on so many of our hearts.

For others, the only words written upon their hearts are bitterness and anger. They are so convinced that the world or others or God has done them wrong that they simply can’t get past it. And hearts that have bitterness and anger upon them are very hard indeed.

What words are written on your heart? It matters, you see, because those things have to be cleared out of the way for us to see and understand what God wants to write on our hearts.

Today's passage appears in the midst of Jeremiah's tenacious prophecies warning that God's judgment is falling upon the people because of their faithlessness. In the midst of war, Jeremiah has dared to describe the war as God's judgment on Israel. He has named Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem as being God's will, and has even dared to proclaim that the Babylonians will ultimately be victorious because God is sending them into exile as punishment.

Obviously, the king was none too pleased, so the king ordered that Jeremiah put under house arrest by the court guard. After all, he argued, kings could invoke God's name for their projects but prophets were to speak of only spiritual matters, especially when they disagreed with the king.

But the exile began. Soon the temple was destroyed and the city put to ruins. God had torn down his dwelling place among them, forcing the people to wonder: Was God abandoning them forever? So it seemed. Was the covenant over? Had God thrown them out forever? Was there a future beyond this terrifying present, or was this God's final word to them? To this turmoil and suffering, in this crisis and transition, Jeremiah speaks another word—one of consolation. God promises a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah.

This is the only place in the Old Testament where the word "new" appears in relation to the word "covenant." Covenant in other places most often refers to the relationships God established with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David, and most especially the relationship God forged with the people at Sinai. Whenever that covenant made at Sinai had been broken, it was followed by covenant renewal—Moses at Moab, Joshua at Shechem, and Samuel when the people finally got their king.

But Jeremiah is not speaking of covenant renewal. That can and will be broken again. Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant—one unlike the former. Yet, if you look closely at the shape of the promise Jeremiah announces, it still incorporates God's law, it still promises an intimate relationship between God and God's people, it still promises knowledge of God for everyone in the covenant community, from the least to the greatest. All of that was promised at Sinai. So what is so new about this covenant Jeremiah announces?

Just this: Sinai was written on tables of stone, leading to lock-ups, lock-outs, and all the consequences of living in separation from God. The new covenant will be written on flesh—inscribed on the very center of human volition and will—the human heart. The

bearers of this covenant will not only know what it means to be God's covenant people in the world, they will actually behave that way. God will not throw them out because of their defects and replace them with another people. Ezekiel, the prophet of the exile, will describe it this way, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

What is new about this covenant, then, is God's promise to place God's ways on their hearts rather than write them in stone, so that they know the Lord so well they live with and for the Lord in faithful obedience.

When Jeremiah goes on to describe what God will write upon our hearts, though, we notice that is perhaps different from what we imagine. We find there not a list of do's and don'ts, as we might have expected to find. No, we find a description of the relationship that God desires with us: "I will be your God and you shall be my people."

That's what you will find written on our hearts. That's ultimately what defines us. You can say it like this: "In life and in death, we belong to God."

You can sing it, as we will do in our final hymn this morning: "When we are living, it is in Christ Jesus. And when we're dying, it is in the Lord. Both in our living, and in our dying, we belong to God, we belong to God."

You can enact it at the font, as we will do with and for Kristen in just a few moments. Even as Kristen drips with the baptismal waters, I will say the words of the church: "Kristen, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

Here's the truth: from this moment forward others are going to try to write things on her heart that don't belong there. Others will do their dead-level best to convince her that she is less than what God has created and called her to be.

And that's where you and I come in. And, baptizing Kristen just brings it into focus, but the responsibility is there for each of us toward each of us every single day. We are to pray for and nurture and love and support one another so that we live out of the truth of who we really are: We are God's beloved children. And if we really get that, it will make a world a difference in the way we treat others. And the way we feel about ourselves. It can even change what we think of the ways of this God who always seeks to remind us that He is our God and we are his people. And if we really get that, if we really live out of that identity, we and the world along with us will be transformed in ways we can't even begin to imagine.