

## **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

**By Eric Howell**

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**March 29, 2009**

The thread running through the Biblical narrative is God trying over and over again to reach out to the people. And the people over and over again yo-yoing on their response. Sometimes it's very positive. Those times are usually when people are in deepest trouble and cry out to God for rescue and relief. "God forgive us for what we've done. We promise to be more devoted to you and your ways." And God acts, often by intervening in their lives or providing some way out. And then things get better, life gets easier, and the people wander away from devotion to their God. And then things get worse, and the people cry out to God again for help. And over and over we go. The stories of the leaders of Israel—the judges and kings—bear this out over and over again. One will be righteous. The next will be evil. The next will be righteous. The next will be evil. The cycle of obedience and disobedience, faithfulness and faithlessness, devotion and idolatry, justice and injustice, and response to God and ignoring God, repeats itself over and over. The history of Israel was the persistent failure to live according to the terms of God's covenant for very long. They not only refused to obey, they were incapable of long obedience. Asks Jeremiah, "Can a Nubian change his skin color? Can a leopard change his spots?" Sound familiar?

This is not just dusty biblical history. It's the character of our humanity. It's us. We are those people. They are us. I guess that's maybe why Lent has to be so long. It doesn't seem fair, does it? Six weeks of the increasing darkness of Lent, but only four of the light and joy of Advent. Six weeks of the deepening despair of Lent, but only one of Pentecost? Forty days leading to the cross. That's a long time. Anyone who eagerly adopted a Lenten discipline back in mid-February can't wait for Lent to be over. What seemed like such a good idea back then, to really focus on God and really make a sacrifice in life that would bring you closer to a sense of God's presence and awareness of your own sinfulness seemed like a good thing back then. But now that it's the fifth week of Lent, time wearies on.

It's hard to maintain a long obedience. I remember as a 3rd-grader knowing that I was on the path to an unfortunate mark in citizenship for a grading period. Talks too much, doesn't listen when told, doesn't stand in line, laughs with the other boys, etc., etc., etc. With one week left in the reporting period, I figured I'd better straighten up. I distinctly remember standing as tall and quiet as I could fashion myself in the hallway as the teacher walked by. I remember raising my hand extra high. I remember invoking all the pleases, yes-ma'ams, and thank yous that I could squeeze into normal conversation. "Yes, ma'am, may I please say thank you once again to you." I kept this up for a long, long time. About a week. But my futile attempts to erase the past by a few moments of manufactured goodness weren't enough to tip the scales in my favor. And my parents

got the report card. Making bad grades is bad enough, but there can be reasons: just don't get the multiplication tables, hard to parse a sentence, couldn't find Mongolia on a map in social studies. There was never any excuse for bad behavior. Not: everyone else was doing it. Not: the teacher is picking on me. Not: it wasn't me. It was the other kid named Eric. She just got confused. None of those things worked. They rarely work. You can't outpace a lifetime of bad with a moment of good.

Israel never maintained a long obedience. And the cycle of disobedience and the disregard for the ways of God took them farther and farther away from their calling to be God's own people. To be people of the covenant. To be a light in the world.

By the time of Jeremiah, whose words we read as we began worship this morning, there were dark days in Israel's history. Perhaps the darkest. The northern kingdom, formally called Israel, was already wiped off the map by the Assyrians. Her people were deported into exile. The southern kingdom Judah was itself under siege by the Babylonians. At best, Jerusalem was a vassal. Its day as any sort of proud, independent center for worship and self-rule was ending. These were dark days by consequence, not just by circumstance. Yes, it's true that both Assyria and Babylon rose to be regional superpowers against which the tiny nation of Israel stood little chance. That's the circumstance. Sometimes life looks hopeless. But tiny Israel in her glory days had overcome greater odds. This is the people, remember, who were trapped between an approaching bloodthirsty Egyptian army and an impassable sea. This is the people for whom the seas parted and the approaching force was stopped. So nothing is impossible for the God of this people. They just sometimes forget that. And they had forgotten it—again—predictably. They had forgotten it for a long, long time. And this is the consequence. God isn't rescuing them this time. God's not stepping in.

But God does give a word of almost-impossible hope. A day will come when I will make a new covenant with these people—the same people with whom I made the old covenant. The people I led by the hand out of Egypt, the people who broke my covenant like a cheating spouse. Those people. Them. Us.

Last time I gave my law on tablets of stone. Next time I will write it on their hearts. It will be within them. I will be their God, and they will be My people. There will not be any need for an intermediary to go around saying, "Know the Lord" because everyone will know. Everyone—from the least to the greatest, the smartest to the slowest, the richest to the poorest, the male to the female, slave to the free, Jew to the Gentile—will know.

Centuries later, two groups of people took the language of new covenant. One group was the sectarians of Quomron, for whom the newness of any covenant was more stringent legalistic requirements. Newness just meant redoubled efforts. The other group was Christians who saw the fulfillment of Jeremiah's words in the death and resurrection

of Jesus Christ and the promise given to the community gathered in his name. In Christ, they experienced an invitation and calling to ‘know God.’

Knowledge in modern-day parlance is to have head-knowledge. It’s to have some measure of understanding. Knowledge in biblical usage is much more than that. It’s the most profound connotation. Intimate personal knowledge of the emotions, the mind, and the will. To know God the way God desires to be known is not just something that happens in your head—by learning. You can’t learn your way to this. Not just something that happens in your heart—by emotions. You can’t feel your way to this. Not just something that happens in your will—by your actions. You can’t work your way to this. Knowledge of God is something that happens in the deepest, most inner place in your soul, when your soul turns and is opened to God in Christ.

Thomas Merton reflects on what it means to have this kind of relationship with God, calling it contemplation, which might sound a little bookish and dusty, but not the way he talks about it: “Contemplation is the highest expression of a person’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being.” (NS 1). He goes on, “For in contemplation we know by ‘unknowing.’ Or better, we know beyond all knowing or unknowing. It is as if in creating us God asked a question, and in awakening us to contemplation He answered the question, so that the contemplative is at the same time, question and answer.”

All this may sound a bit confusing. The knowing and unknowing. Question and answer, so hear it this way. God wants you to know Him. And will do anything and has done everything to make that possible. The path to that intimate knowledge includes learning, feeling, and doing. But the path is not characterized by those things. The path to knowing God begins in your soul. The two characteristics of the new covenant are intimate personal knowledge of God and forgiveness of sins. In Jeremiah God says, “I will forgive their iniquities, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Theirs. Yours. The path to knowledge of God begins with repentance. In the New Testament, or new covenant, the word for repentance is *metanoia*, which has as its root word a word we use sometimes around here and the Fathers of the church used quite a bit: *nous*. Meta-change-nouia—the deepest truest part of you. Turn the deepest, truest part of yourself to God.

What that looks like and feels like is a lot like Psalm 51, “Have mercy on me, O God. . . .”

The cry of Psalm 51 is a profound prayer of repentance, a prayer of a desperate heart. Of this psalm Luther commented that God desires the prayers of a person who knows their sin and knows their need for the mercy of God. It is an appropriate preparation for receiving the Lord’s Supper.