

A New Heart, A New Mind Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34 Lent 5/B (Feast of St. Patrick)
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During the fifth century AD, Britain ceased to be part of the Roman Empire and became a group of small warring territories, resulting in aggression against the populace. Slavery was a common fate for those captured in raids or warfare. It was into this context that a 16-year-old boy named Patrick was taken prisoner by a group of Irish raiders who had attacked his family's estate. They transported him to Ireland where he spent six years in captivity. During that time, he worked as a shepherd, outdoors and away from people. Lonely and afraid, he turned to his religion for solace, becoming a devout Christian. After more than six years as a prisoner, Patrick escaped and returned home to Britain.

As you may recall, St. Patrick was born in Britain to wealthy parents near the end of the fourth century. He is believed to have died on March 17, around 460 A.D. which is why we celebrate his namesake today. Although his father was a Christian deacon, there is no evidence that Patrick came from a particularly religious family. Once home, Patrick received a revelation in a dream during which an angel told him to return to Ireland as a missionary. Soon after that revelation, Patrick began religious training, a course of study that lasted more than 15 years. After his ordination to the priesthood, he was sent to Ireland with a dual mission: to minister to Christians already living in Ireland and to begin to convert the Irish.

Familiar with the Irish language and culture, Patrick chose to incorporate traditional Celtic rituals into his lessons of Christianity instead of attempting to eradicate native Irish beliefs. For instance, he used bonfires to celebrate Easter since the Irish were used to honoring their gods with fire. He also superimposed a sun, a powerful Irish symbol, onto the Christian cross to create what is now called a Celtic cross, so that veneration of the symbol would seem more natural to the Irish.

While there are many myths and legends about St. Patrick (like driving the snakes from Ireland), what we do know for sure is his deep and abiding love of God in Christ. What can motivate a person like Patrick to return to a foreign country where he had been enslaved in order to share Christ's love as a missionary? It was grace- nothing less than a new heart and a new mind which the prophet Jeremiah spoke of in today's first biblical reading. Let's take a closer look.

In one of the most important prophetic utterances of the Old Testament, Jeremiah prophesied that God would make a new covenant with the people of Israel. This covenant would not be based on following legal precepts but rather an internal conversion of the heart and mind: "I 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord." (Jer. 31)

Twenty-six hundred years ago, the city of Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed by the invading Babylonian Army. It was believed that this occurred because the Jewish people had broken their covenant with God. And while there were some who still followed God's laws, many of the Israelites were hard-hearted and failed to live up to the expectation of being the people of God. During this tumultuous time, Jeremiah the prophet offered the Jewish people the promise of a new covenant to sustain their hope. For without hope, the human heart would break.

A covenant is an agreement, entered willfully between two parties in order to enhance and deepen their relationship. The most common covenant that people enter into today is the covenant of marriage. In this kind of covenant, two people usually agree to a life-long partnership based on fidelity, mutual affection, and respect. Sometimes these covenants are broken causing tremendous pain and loss. Such was situation when the people of Israel broke the covenant they made with God. Instead of loving God and their neighbor, they chose greed, corruption, exploitation of the poor, and idol worship instead.

As you may recall, this first covenant was made by God in the form of the 10 commandments as the Hebrew people traveled from Egypt into the promised land. Moses often reminded the people of this covenant: "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and

ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.” (Deuteronomy 30)

Some 800 years later after Moses died, this original covenant was broken by the hardened hearts and unfaithful living of the Israelites. The Babylonian Army ended up conquering Jerusalem, destroying the temple, and exiling the people. It was into this traumatic context that Jeremiah offered words of comfort & hope along with a promise of a new covenant, a new way of walking in the world.

So you might ask yourself, well, if Jeremiah prophesied this transformation of the human heart some 2600 years ago, when are things going to change for the better? Why does Israel continue today with the slaughter of over 31,000 Palestinians, 70% of which are women and children? Why have they displaced 2.3 million people within the Gaza Strip who are now facing a major humanitarian crisis of starvation and deprivation. We can also ask similar questions of our own country. Why has congress approved a program of upgrading our 400 ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) which is now estimated at a cost of over 131 billion dollars? Why isn't our country more focused on strengthening our society and saving our planet rather than destroying one another with weapons of mass destruction?

From my perspective, most of the problems facing our world today are spiritual problems requiring spiritual solutions. While political solutions can temporarily put a band aid on chaos, they have a limited long-term success rate. The truth is that most of the chaos in the world today is due to greed, insatiable power, and revenge, all arising from a selfish ego, an injured heart, and a disturbed mind. And while laws can set boundaries and guide us into righteous living, laws cannot ultimately transform the human heart or mind.

Take for example, racism. Despite the 13th Amendment to the Constitution that abolished slavery in the United States, the 15th Amendment giving black men the right to vote, the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibiting discrimination, and the 1965 Voting Act that prohibits the denial of voting rights on account of race, racism continues to raise its ugly head, diminishing the dignity of people of color.

It was a similar realization that *laws are limited in their ability to change people's hearts and minds* when Jeremiah promised a new covenant. This new covenant would not be like the old one which was based on an externally written set of religious laws that required constant instruction and discipline. Instead, this new covenant would be based on a transformed heart and mind where God's laws are internalized. And the way this transformation would happen is not through more laws, not through political negotiations, not through one's limited ego strength, but through God's grace, a power that is far stronger than our ego strength alone.

“Grace is God's favor towards us, unearned, undeserved. By grace, God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills.” {BCP 858} And while we cannot control God's grace, we can create a lifestyle where our hearts and minds are open to its effectual workings. That is one of the reasons we have come here today-for a new heart and a new mind. One of the ways we can consciously open up a conduit for God's grace to transform our heart and mind, is by practicing the spiritual disciplines. These spiritual practices include but are not limited to worship, prayer, silence, meditation, service to others, confession, submission, study, and fasting. (*Offer sailboat example*)

Looking back on history, the 19th century saw more than 2 million Irish refugees land on American soil, forced into exile by a humanitarian and political disaster called “the Great Hunger.” They were poor, disease ridden, and viewed as an economic threat; migrants who would eventually strain the welfare budgets and increase crime. And yet our country, who once reviled the Irish, now wears green on St. Patrick's Day, viewing the Irish with a new heart and a new mind. Conversion is possible for all who turn to Christ! So as we celebrate this Feast Day of St. Patrick, perhaps one of the avenues of grace we can embrace would be to focus our meditation time on the prayer known as St. Patrick's Breastplate: “I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three. Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.” (Hymn #370)