

## **Lent V**

### **March 29, 2009**

Throughout Lent, our readings have been looking at the history of God's dealings with his people—the history of covenant—and how God's people have responded to that. Meanwhile, just because it's Lent, we've been looking at ourselves—at how God is dealing with us now, and with how we have responded to that. (The more seriously we've taken these forty days, the more seriously we tried to accept the Church's call to a holy Lent, the more clearly we have seen ourselves.) The readings from Scripture that the church has given us for today speak to all of this—to who we are, to where we have been, and to what all that means. Then these same readings aim us, very precisely, at next week, at Palm Sunday and that follows.

We begin with Jeremiah—the Prophet who preached the longest, and who saw the most. Jeremiah, and the book that bears his name, are a fascinating study in ironic contrasts.

Jeremiah began his ministry in Jerusalem when the future looked grim—with invaders or potential invaders everywhere—but also at a time when the people and the leaders thought there was still hope. Israel was playing a complex and dangerous game of international intrigue. The kings formed and broke alliances with just about every real or potential empire in the world—Babylon, Egypt, Syria, Texas, you name it—all the time hoping to manipulate the political situation to their advantage. Jeremiah preached repentance and catastrophe. What Israel was doing, he insisted, was the way of the nations; it was the way of disaster; to play politics with God's holy nation was to insure its destruction. He insisted that Jerusalem was doomed, the kings were corrupt and destined for a bad end, and the kingdom was finished.

Jeremiah was not real popular.

But he was right. The worst happened: the politicians failed, the generals failed, the Babylonians won and the nation fell. Those who survived were taken into exile.

Then, not long after this disaster, Jeremiah wrote a letter to exiles. (Today's reading is a part of that letter.) Remember, Jeremiah was right and they were wrong—the hope they had counted on had failed; and now it's Jeremiah's turn to talk to a captive audience. You can almost guess what he was going to say. But he doesn't—he doesn't gloat, he doesn't say "I told you so" and he doesn't giggle. He does the unexpected.

For the first time in all of his preaching, Jeremiah offers hope—a new hope based on an old idea. To the remnant of the house of Judah, using the antiquated Hebrew phrases the Bible uses only to talk about the covenants with Noah and Abraham, Jeremiah promises a new covenant. This new covenant will be in continuity with earlier covenants but profoundly more significant, profoundly more intimate. It will be a covenant that joins God and his people, a covenant that destroys distance and covers sin—a covenant that remakes the relationship Israel has broken. The old covenant has been violated—God has responded with judgment, but not with utter destruction—and now there is the promise of something new.

That's the promise—a new covenant. Jeremiah saw that far, farther than anyone had seen before him. But he left open the next question. He didn't say what that covenant would be. He didn't describe what it would look like, how it would be made. For centuries after Jeremiah, Israel held on to the hope of this promised new covenant, and wondered what it would be, and waited.

Then, some Greeks wish to see Jesus. Not Israelites, not Samaritans, but Greeks—gentiles, aliens, natural-born pagans. In John's gospel these Greeks are representatives of us. They stand for the whole world outside Israel. They wish to see Jesus. So they go to Philip (the only apostle with a Greek name) who goes through channels and gets the word to Jesus.

Somehow, that message tips the scales of history, and Jesus—who has up to now constantly insisted (first to his mother, then to everyone else) that his hour has not yet come—Jesus says that his hour at hand—and Jeremiah’s glimpse of the future begins to unfold. As Jesus becomes aware that those Greeks, and through them the whole world, are looking for him and at him, Jesus says “now”. Now is the time for glory, now is the time for victory, now is the time for judgment. All that has gone before is passing away, and a new thing is springing forth. ‘When I am lifted up’, Jesus shouts, creation will be made new.

And to the disciples, to all who were watching—both Jew and Greek, the question remained, the question of Jeremiah remained. What will that look like, what will it be like, what is the reality behind the rhetoric of the new covenant, of the lifting up of the Son of Man?

Will it be the passive beauty of the rainbow, where we can watch, smile, say “how nice”, and go about our business? Will it be like the fire and thunder of Sinai, where God offers love in the form of laws, and the people dance around a golden calf? Will it include the blood and pageantry of the temple, where sacrifice is made, and money changes hands? What will it look like—now that the hour has finally come?

You see, that’s our question—that’s the question Lent always gives us as we walk toward Palm Sunday, toward the Sunday of the Passion. What will it look like to us, what will it be like for us, once more—one more time—to say “yes” to the prophesy of Jeremiah and the suffering of Jesus? What will it look like for us to take our place with Philip and Andrew and some Greeks, and hundreds of generation before us who have chosen to follow this Lord of ours—and so to be where he has been?

What will it look like for this new covenant to happen to us? Now is the time to look at what *we* will have to do if we are to take what we have learned about ourselves this Lent, or what we already knew about ourselves, and act.

We know what this looked like for Jesus—we will see that again on Palm Sunday and Good Friday—we will hear the ringing cries of “Hosanna”, and the metallic ring of a hammer on nails. We know that, then, it looked like death. We know that the promised new covenant begins not with rainbows, or with tablets of stone, or with the defeat of armies—but with the struggle of one man to be obedient—obedient even to death. And God desires this law be written on our hearts, also.

And maybe we have learned something this Lent about what stands between our hearts, and the Word God is trying to write on them. For us, that may be a truth about ourselves we would rather not face; it may be the reality of sin we have tried to ignore; it may be something totally harmless if it were part of someone else—but it’s a part of us; it may be a decision long postponed; a commitment not yet made. It may be changes we realize we need to make, things we need to give up, new directions we need to go. One of the gifts this Lent may have given us is an ability to see more clearly what it is that stands between our hearts and God’s writing.

The impulse is to flee, to run, to hide, to postpone, to wait, and to re-evaluate. There are a thousand instantly available plans for escape.

But now is the time—the hour has come for the making, and the remaking, and the renewal, of this new covenant.

What will it mean for us to make this Easter real, for us to make it as powerful as it can be for our lives? Today, we are asked that question and driven to the cross. The danger is overwhelming, the hope is greater still.

We are called to grasp that hope, and to act.