JEREMIAH 31:31-34

A SERMON FOR REFORMATION DAY

©2005 Douglas L. Rutt

Fear. There is a lot of fear in our nation today. It is probably true that there is a lot of fear around the world, as nations rise up against nations, and people against people, and innocent people, who are simply trying to go about their lives are becoming victims of terrorist attacks. We don't know where it will all lead. We do not know what might happen next. We don't know when Osama bin Ladin or some other evil person bent on destruction is going to carry out another attack. We had been used to living in relative security here in our land, but now that has all changed, and so, there is a lot of fear. Fear of what next, and will we be prepared to confront what will come next.

And when we think of the natural disasters that our world has seen in the past few months, Tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, these things can instill in us a sense of fear, because we wonder what is this world coming to? The entire world seems to be falling apart?

But thanks be to God that he has not left us alone! God has made promises to us that he will fulfill. He has promised us that in spite of what we may see going on in the world around us, he is still the God of heaven and earth and he will establish his church, and as he told the disciples, even the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

In today's Old Testament lesson from the prophet Jeremiah, we hear about a promise that God had made to his chosen people. This promise was given through Jeremiah at a time not unlike ours today. There was great conflict among all the nations surrounding God's people. It was a period of storm and stress, when the doom of entire nations, including Judah itself, was being sealed. Fear was very much a part of the scene during Jeremiah's time also.

But God did not leave his people without hope, and he made a wonderful promise that would sustain his faithful people then, that has sustained many faithful people through the centuries, and that can sustain his faithful people today, for it speaks of a New Covenant, a new promise, that God made to his people. Today, as we face the fear caused by the situation in the world day, we can also remember and be assured by

THE BLESSINGS OF THE NEW COVENANT

The new covenant that God has communicated to us through the prophet Jeremiah.

One of the most comforting and meaningful verses in our text is the last, when God speaks through the prophet these soothing words to the troubled soul: *"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* Forgiveness of sins is the primary blessing of the new covenant, upon which all others build. At the same time, forgiveness of sins is also something that we have a hard time believing, and even if we believe it, we have a hard time applying it to our lives, sometimes especially to ourselves!

It is true that Martin Luther did not truly understand God's forgiveness at first. Even after he became a doctor of theology and a teacher at the University of Wittenberg he still did not really understand how he, a sinful human being, could presume to stand before an almighty, righteous God.

It has been almost 500 years since Luther wrote about his trouble with the Biblical term *"the righteousness of God."* That phrase scared him. It was downright repulsive to him because he thought it meant that God proved Himself to be righteous by punishing unrighteous sinners. He saw God as an angry, wrathful, vengeful God, who was constantly angry at the whole world, and who dealt out punishments left and right to all for their disobedience. He was afraid of God.

He wasn't afraid of God in the proper way. It wasn't the kind of fear that means honor,

respect and esteem. The thought of God terrified Luther, because he knew where he really stood in relationship with God's Law. He recognized that no matter what he did, no matter what spiritual exercises he tried to perform, no matter how good he tried to be, no matter how he beat himself or fasted or did anything to try to make himself worthy to God, he recognized that it was a poor excuse for the perfect obedience that God's law demands. He knew that no matter what, he was still a poor sinful being.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, Luther eventually came to realize that God's righteousness was actually something altogether different than what he thought. God's righteousness was actually the perfect obedience and the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Luther finally came to the realization that because of Christ's atoning sacrifice God declared pardon and forgiveness for all sinful humanity. He finally understood that the righteousness of God is the righteousness of Christ, which becomes our righteousness by faith. All of the sudden, passages like the Epistle lesson for today, passages that Luther probably just couldn't make sense of before, began to come clearly into focus, for example, when the Apostle Paul wrote: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are declared righteous freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Wow, can you imagine the change in the life of Luther when he went from the belief that God was an angry judge who was out to punish him for every wrong, to the understanding that God was a loving God, a loving God who forgave his sins because of the work of his Son Jesus Christ? Can you imagine how that changed everything for Luther?

Martin Luther stressed the depth of God's grace and mercy in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: *"He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers."* Again, this forgiveness is so complete and final that the Lord God says: "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

We have all heard, and probably even said something like: "I'll forgive, but I'll never forget." Our sinful nature often expresses itself in those kinds of thoughts, thoughts of revenge. We remember how Peter was reluctant to forgive. Remember the question he asked of Jesus once? *"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?*" But Jesus answered, *"I tell you, not seven times but seventy times seven.*"

Our heavenly Father is not reluctant to forgive. He was so fully satisfied with the payment for sin made by His Son that it is as if we had not sinned at all. That is the great difference between our faith, and other religious systems that have developed around the world. While other religions, in some way or another, seek to satisfy the deity by works, or sacrifices, or meditation, or whatever, our religion is really more properly called a faith, because we have faith that God does indeed forgive our sins. And he doesn't just forgive, he even forgets! While Islam, for example, is a religion that expresses a belief in one God, that God is far off, far away. Our God, the true God, is not far off, and we are not far from him, because he has forgiven and forgotten our sins.

Now, looking at the situation at the time when Jeremiah said these words on behalf of God, we ask, what did God mean when He accused His people of wickedness? The answer is simple: *"They broke my covenant."*

Ordinarily, to have a covenant means that two parties make an agreement whereby they both agree to do something. But in God's covenant He does all the giving, or the doing, and the people only receive what He gives. The old covenant was deliverance after 400 years of slavery in

Egypt, and the promise of a land of their own, a fertile and rich land. But from the beginning the people pouted, complained, and rebelled. In spite of God's leading them *"by the hand"* to the Promised Land, their sinful, unbelieving hearts turned them away from the living God.

Earlier in the book of Jeremiah, we hear of the sins of the people. God said: "They have returned to the sins of their forefathers, who refused to listen to my words. They have followed other gods to serve them. Both the house of Judah and the house of Israel have broken the covenant I made with their forefathers" (Jer. 11:10).

But, now, as we hear Jeremiah say, the new covenant would be different. The old covenant was given to a select nation; to a people who rejected it, now the new would be for everyone who through faith receives the forgiveness of sins merited by the Savior. People of every and any class, tongue, color, or culture are invited now, to be partakers of this new covenant, with its blessing of forgiveness given freely to all who believe and trust in Him.

And so, in the first place, we need not fear, because God has given to us the blessing of his forgiveness, life and eternal salvation. As Paul said once, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

II.

But there is more, because for all who believe, a new life begins. God says: *"I will put my law in their minds, and I will write it on their hearts."*

What God is saying here is that for the Christian believer, God's Law begins to effectively govern his or her life. For the Christian, God's law is not just something written on tablets of stone, but it is put into our minds, and inscribed upon our hearts.

It means that we begin to, as weak and feeble as our attempts may be, but we begin to live in conformity with God's will from a proper motivation. Not because we are threatened by it, as if God were standing there with a big club ready to let us have it every time we break his commandments, but because God's Spirit works a desire in our hearts to serve and obey Him.

Martin Luther's greatest friend and ally during the Reformation was a layman by the name of Philip Melanchthon. Melanchthon was a great theologian, who wrote of the new life a person has in Christ, by referring to "spiritual impulses in the heart." This is what he wrote: *"What these impulses are, the prophet shows when he says 'I will put my law upon their hearts.' After we have been justified and regenerated by faith, therefore, we begin to fear and love God, to pray and expect help from Him, to thank and praise him, and to submit to him in our afflictions. Then we also begin to love our neighbor because our hearts have spiritual and holy impulses."*

In other words, what God so earnestly desired for his people of the Old Testament becomes real and genuine under the new covenant: "I will be their God, and they will be my people." We become God's people, ready to listen, ready to obey, ready to serve. Oh yes, the old Adam is still there, and it still influences us so that we certainly don't obey perfectly. But in Christ we are a new creation, and God's Spirit then has the opportunity to help us show our love toward Him and toward our neighbor. We are God's people.

Can the people of God be recognized? Where voices of praise send psalms and hymns and spiritual songs heavenward, where infants are brought to be baptized, where the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, where the blood of the new covenant is received with the true body of Christ in the bread and wine—there the people of God are.

But the people of God are seen not only when they are joined together in corporate worship, as we are this afternoon. We are still his people when we are apart from each other as well. We are still his people seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. In our everyday lives, in our

everyday activities, in crowded rooms, in the classroom, in the lonely places, on the job. Everywhere we are His people. Former quarterback of the Pittsburgh Steelers during their heyday, Terry Bradshaw, once told the local clergy: "I am a Christian who happens to be a quarterback"--Christian first, occupation second. We can say the same. "I am a Christian who happens to be a secretary." "I am a Christian who happens to be a salesman." "I am a Christian who happens to be a farmer."

But we remember that we are still God's people when everything seems to go wrong also. When health fails, when the bills pile up, when a loved one is taken from us, when we face a serious problem. Or, in the present situation we are facing as citizens of the United States, we remember that we are not just citizens of our nation, but first we are God's people. While as citizens of our nation we recognize the need to defend our country, to pray for our president and other leaders, to perhaps even take up arms in self-defense, yet as God's people we know that we are called to an even higher ethical ideal, for Jesus says that we are to love those who hate us, and to pray for those who persecute us.

III.

There is one more important blessing of the new covenant mentioned here in Jeremiah that relates very well to our celebration of the Reformation of the Church, and gives us courage and comfort in our daily lives. God says: *"No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord, 'because they <u>will</u> know me, from the least of them to the greatest."* We have the blessing of the revelation of Scripture, the third point.

In the Old Testament period, prophets would surface from time to time and bring the Lord's message to various groups and individuals. Those who heard it would then pass the information on to others. But today we have access to God's entire Word, whatever our place in life, young or old, child or theologian. What a blessing! Think of the darkness in your life if you didn't have that word to fall back on, when all the other earthly props and crutches give away. Think of where we would be if we did not have God's revelation in his word, through which we learn about and trust in his great promises.

Martin Luther recognized the importance of making the word of God available to as many people as possible. He so he did not only discover anew God's grace in Jesus Christ. He also was a great missionary and evangelist. Much of his missionary activity was carried out as a Bible translator. Luther completed the German New Testament in the fall of 1522, and 5,000 copies were sold by the end of the year. During the next 12 years, 200,000 copies were bought. By 1534 he completed the translation of the Old Testament. And it is not an easy task to translate the Bible from one language into another. It is kind of funny what Luther wrote as he struggled to translate the original Hebrew into German:

"We are now sweating over the translation of the prophets into German. O God, what great and hard toil it requires to compel the original writers against their will to spell German. They do not want to give up their Hebrew and imitate the barbaric German. Just as though a nightingale should be compelled to imitate a cuckoo and give up her glorious melody, even though she hates a song in monotone."

Bible translation is a hard and toilsome task. But Luther knew it was necessary to get the Word of God's grace in Christ Jesus out to the greatest number of people. And he helped get the Bible into languages other than German as well. And now, of course, many, many translations of the Bible into English have appeared in recent years. There are translations to meet the needs of almost any reader, from a little child, to a Doctor of Theology.

Another of the other missionary activities that Luther carried out was the preparation of

the Catechism. Indeed, evangelization was to be done through the Catechism. It was prepared as a manual also for the heathen, so that they would be taught the truths of the Christian faith in simple form.

When you think about it, it is such a marvelous thing that God has preserved across the centuries this treasure for us in His Word. It truly is a blessing of the New Covenant--the revelation of His true love and care for lost mankind, given in His Word. As we sing, "God's word is our great heritage, and shall be ours forever, to spread its light from age to age, shall be our chief endeavor."

On this observance of the Reformation we give thanks and praise to God for the blessings of the new covenant: We thank and praise him for the forgiveness of sins, the life and the salvation that is ours because Christ obeyed and was sacrificed for us. And we thank and praise God for the new life we have by faith with God's Law written in our hearts, and we thank and praise him for His entire revelation to us in Scripture so that we may be *"wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"* and *"thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

And especially, we can see and appreciate that because of these great blessings of the New Covenant that are ours, we need not fear. You know that what we are facing today, the threat of attack by Islamic nations and groups is nothing new. It was a very real threat during the entire lifetime of Martin Luther. There was great fear in Germany and the entire Holy Roman Empire during Luther's time because of the threat of invasion by the Islamic nations. That is why the first verse of that hymn meant to comfort children originally was: "Lord keep us steadfast in thy word, restrain the murd'rous Pope and Turk, Who fain would tear from off Thy throne, Christ Jesus Thy beloved Son."

What we are facing today is nothing new. It is a conflict that has been going on for ages. But we can be assured and comforted by the promises that God has made to us in his word, promises of a New Covenant. Because of the promises of that new covenant, we can confidently and boldly confess the words of our Psalm today; Psalm 46, the Psalm upon which Martin Luther based his famous hymn, A Mighty Fortress. We can confess and proclaim to the entire world: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear."

INI