

Genesis 2:8-25
Mark 14:32-36
Romans 5:12-19

JESUS & ADAM

Struggling formally with the identity of Jesus, the church came up with a formula (around 325 A.D.) which has proved to be the best we can do so far. It claims that Jesus is “fully God” *and* “fully man.” That is gibberish, of course. It formalizes a paradox that nobody can understand – mixes the unmixable – and then claims it to be the truth. Yet this gibberish points to the mystery of Jesus’ identity better than anything else we have come up with. It is not possible to think about Jesus for more than a few seconds without starting to err against one side of that formula or the other. And that is exactly where we need to leave it – baffled but radiant. We cannot get Jesus into a box. We are constantly trying to make Him too holy to be relevant, or too human to be our Savior.

Because Jesus is so unique, we sometimes want to honor Him by thinking that no earthly influence could have influenced or shaped His life. But if that were so, then He is fully God, and not man at all. One of the most obvious things about us humans is that we are so greatly influenced by parents, teachers, friends, circumstances, and experiences. If that is not true of Jesus, then what have we to do with Him? What manner of understanding can there be between Him and us?

Speaking very personally, I began to realize some years ago that I am not moved very much by Jesus’ divinity. I am convinced of it – I believe it – but it has minimal impact upon me. What reaches me – what moves me – is watching Jesus the human being – immersed in all the issues, limitations, feelings, and desires of a human being – and then watching what He does with that – seeing how He reacts and decides and responds to it all.

For me, it is watching how Jesus lives that makes me conclude that He was unique – that He was Messiah, Savior, Son of God. He does not DO life like we do – at least not like I do. While many people did not like Him or His Way – even ended up His enemies, a thing I understand all too easily – I nevertheless end up believing that He lived His life better, higher, truer, and more beautifully than any

other human being who ever came here. And when I can no longer find adequate human motive or explanation for that, well, my soul knows it is time to posit God. Convictions of divinity are forced upon me not by trying to think of Jesus as divine, but by trying to comprehend Him as merely human.

And so, though I know I am in the numerical minority, I am not much impressed by the many ways that “institutional” Christianity tries to indoctrinate or instill within us the conviction that Jesus is divine. To conclude such a thing to begin with – because it is handed to us as a thing we are supposed to believe – and then trying to get real about it afterward seems to me to be at the root of all hypocrisy and play-acting. I keep wondering why so many thousands of Christians can *believe* in the Divinity of Christ – can *believe* in the Virgin Birth, the Trinity, the sacraments, the correct theological formulas, and the holiness of the Bible – yet it has such minuscule impact on how they make their personal decisions, or on what they are living for or how they are living for it. Getting belief ahead of conviction – putting creed before spiritual experience – is the most devastating form of putting the cart before the horse. Actually, it ends up being a cart without any horse at all. It goes nowhere. So all over the world, we have these beautiful creeds sitting around but no power to drive them. They just sit there looking pretty but get us nowhere.

So how did Jesus begin to acquire His strange reputation in the first place? Certainly He did not start out with it. Yes, of course, people spent time with Him, watched Him, got more and more intrigued by Him ... until they began to follow Him around. And when they had done that for a while, they began to realize that they could not put Him into any of the categories they were familiar with. I smile when the disciples get together, after some event or teaching, and say quietly to each other: “Did you see that! Who is this?! What’s going on here? *What manner of man is this?*” (Matthew 8:29) So, quietly, one, and then another, and then another ... they *came to believe*. They did not *try* to believe; nobody told them they were *supposed* to believe. *They came to believe*: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*”

Jesus’ impact on people who come to believe this way is so enormous that we call it conversion – transformation. Life cannot stay the same for people who truly begin to see it in a different light. So I

keep thinking the church will wake up someday and stop trying to *make* people believe. We need to do what Jesus' early friends did: get to know Him, watch Him, go around with Him for a while ... until our souls begin to recognize that He does not fit into any of our categories – until we feel impossible things connecting. Then it will not matter how exactly the creeds are worded – nothing will be able to keep us from following Him into His different WAY of Life.

In this same vein, whether you follow the logic or not, I want to talk just a little bit over the next few Sundays about Jesus' connection to His Jewish heritage. I am convinced that Jesus did not realize His own identity or destiny until after His own baptism – His own conversion. Doubtless many things had been pushing Him, trying to awaken Him for years. John the Baptist was His spiritual mentor, and the catalyst. In any case, Jesus did not live into His identity and role as Messiah by accident, or automatically, or by following some pre-arranged script. Jesus grew up in a devout Jewish home. Clearly, somewhere along the line He had studied the Old Testament more thoroughly and deeply than His peers. I have long suspected that some skeptical but deeply devout old rabbi spent a lot of time with Jesus in His formative years.

In any case, Jesus was exceedingly well-versed in the Torah, and in the issues and arguments which surrounded it. Torah itself requires that He meditate on it day and night. Subsequent arguments with scribes and priests made it clear that this was exactly what He had done. He had huge regard and admiration for the prophets and, I suspect, for all the heroes of His Jewish tradition. Jesus not only knew the stories, but He had contemplated them in great depth. How else could He have known how to wend His way through all the pressures and demands of His own time, shaping His own movement in such a dramatically different fashion? Zealots, Pharisees, Essenes, John's followers – all wanted Jesus to come into *their* movements. But He knew, for instance, the history of the Maccabees, and He knew their approach could never work in the long run. He knew, in fact, the entire history of Israel, and picked from it what He thought was most valuable and shaped it into a New Covenant – a New Way. That does not *explain* Him. His life and ministry and identity are more than that. But without that part of it, the rest of His story has no rhyme or reason – no connection to our world.

So I want to talk briefly about Jesus' connection to some of His heroes. I will try to give a brief biographical sketch of each and talk a bit about the way some of the themes in the lives of these heroes show up in Jesus' life, and hope you will go on seeing far greater connections between the Old and New Testament stories than you have before.

Adam is the first, and most questionable, connection. But Adam serves as an introduction to the rest, so I will still start there. Adam is not a person. Adam is "mankind." Adam is all of us – and each of us. So how do I do a biographical sketch? Sadly, there are lots of ways in which I can.

The story of Adam is profound, and many-faceted. Some of us have our own special wording and ways to approach the story. People have been arguing over the true significance of Adam for a great many years now – well, for over four thousand years at least. We do not have time for all the niceties this morning, just some of the simplest and most basic parts of his biography.

Adam starts out in an idyllic setting, without a worry in the world. He does not really appreciate his circumstances – he does not realize what a special thing it is that all his physical needs are taken care of. His bliss is not earned or valued. He does not appreciate it because he has nothing to compare it with. He is, in the deepest sense of the word, "innocent." How long can you live in this world and stay innocent? We have different experiences, but all of us are Adam, and the answer is: not for very long.

Whatever the temptation ... whatever the snake ... whatever the wound, or betrayal, or loss, or abuse – the answer is: We cannot stay innocent for very long. We begin to realize that some things are good and pleasant, and other things are painful and evil. The veil of innocence falls from our eyes, and we become aware of the battle between good and evil which rages everywhere in our world – inside and out. "*The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*" is a powerful symbol with endless dimensions, but we will keep it very simple and basic this morning.

On with the biographical sketch: Adam is out of the Garden of Eden. Some say he is "kicked out," but I suspect he doesn't have to move an inch. When we lose innocence, nothing around us looks the

same anymore. Even if Adam is still in the Garden, it doesn't look or seem like a Garden anymore. Everything is frightening. Everything is a problem. Where is the next meal coming from? Are *you* the next meal? How do you keep warm? All the animals are starting to seem unfriendly. Eve has developed headaches and a long list of complaints and things that need fixing. After all, she is now just as frightened as you are. Kids are wonderful, but they bring a whole new set of nightmares: You have to feed them too. And what if they get hurt? What if they don't grow up with the right values and habits? Adam is overwhelmed with his fears, his responsibilities, his opportunities – any of which can suddenly turn on him and leave him worse off than he was before.

Adam is out of the Garden. His life is circumscribed by all the things that can go wrong. He tries not to let this get him down. He tries to pretend he has everything under control. But these fears are real and do not go away. So Adam tries to choose the good, and protect himself against the evil. That is what it means to be Adam – the natural man. As such, Adam is estranged from all the sources and purposes of life. He does not mean to be, but the fear does it anyway. He is estranged, suspicious, alienated. The ancient word for this is SIN. He tries to get into control so he can acquire more good and hold off some of the evil – from himself and all whom he cares about. He works very hard, but that puts him into competition, jealousy, more estrangement – one way or the other. Sometimes Adam gets some appreciation for all his labors, but mostly that is short-lived, mixed with other feelings, or balanced by all the criticism and accusation he gets from other quarters. And usually – we could say *always* – his good efforts are mixed with mistakes, blunders, careless moments. Some of them hurt others. Some of them stay in his memory to mar all the good efforts he makes.

The most profound thing about Adam is that his life is surrounded by what are called “the curses”: misunderstanding or animosity between Adam and God, Adam and nature, Adam and Eve, Adam and his neighbors, Adam and himself. On the individual level, this is struggle, sorrow, pain, guilt, and depression. On the collective level, it is war, poverty, tyranny and oppression, ecological disaster, and racial strife. And sometimes, it gets so subtle or familiar that we do not even realize we are all drowning in it. Then it breaks out in full ugliness somewhere, and we all act as if it were strange, unusual,

unheard of. “What could the parents have been thinking?” “It must have been the influence of bad television.” Like we had never even heard of Adam – or Cain and Abel, or even Noah.

Adam is the Natural Man. He lives with the curses. He doesn't mean to be bad – he doesn't want to do so much damage. Often he works hard and tries hard – and the greater his efforts, the more it all keeps turning against him, because his condition, his context, his situation ... is alienation. He tries to do it his own way, and by himself. I mean, in “alienation,” who do you trust? So the more he strives, the deeper the hole he digs. All of us are Adam. Adam is all of us. *Adam* in Hebrew means “mankind.” Adam is our story. Adam is not an individual who lived long ago. Adam is us.

Jesus starts out being Adam too. He knows the story of Adam and ponders it more deeply than anyone ever did before He came along. And eventually Jesus “mutates” (wrong word, but we need the jolt) – Jesus transcends, converts – from Natural Man to Spiritual Man. Not in or by His own power, let us be clear. *The dove descends* – by *God's* power. But Jesus responds – turns back to God – deeply and totally. Jesus starts to see all the history of His people through new eyes that realize: Adam's way cannot work – not ever – no matter how well he may do it in his best moments. You cannot obey Torah and have it come out right in the long run, if you are still the Natural Man. You cannot love your neighbor and have it come out right, if you are still the Natural Man. You cannot fight evil and have it come out right, if you are still the Natural Man. You cannot have a life full of love and hope and joy, if deep inside you think you are awful, that God hates you, and that soon now you will be punished or destroyed. Even total devotion – total allegiance to God – will still invert on us, if we are still the Natural Man.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit” – those who know their absolute need of God. Turn will and life over to God – stop trying to run life your own way. Take all of your ambitions and values out of this natural realm. So Jesus, unlike many of His followers, has no prejudices against the poor *or* the rich. That would only be the Natural Man in reverse. He does not have to win here – not in any of the ways we normally care about. He does not see people in terms of the plots or subplots of the Natural World and its curses. He sees them as children of God, yet hurt and in bondage – to sin, death, and the Devil.

I wish and long to tell *all* the stories that illustrate the genius of Jesus. Clearly it would have taken a theophany – a major religious experience, a conversion – to make the interior changes to support the outer convictions that Jesus demonstrates and reveals in His earthly ministry. The story of Adam is the great “stuck place” of all human life. Jesus breaks beyond it. He does not just change the rules; He has a very different relationship with God. It ends up changing all perspective on who God is, who Jesus is, who *we* are, what life is about, what is truly valuable, what methods and approaches are useful in pursuing our true goals. And those are only the *words*, and cannot begin to explain the *feelings* that go with this transformation.

One more piece before we close. Nobody can contemplate connections between Jesus and Adam for very long without noticing the two Gardens: Eden and Gethsemane. How far is it from Eden to Gethsemane?

Eden is Paradise, but mindless. What we do without conscious choice is meaningless and without purpose. We get kicked out of this Garden – forced by pain and reality to see the problem of good and evil. So we take responsibility. Some say that despite being kicked out of Eden – in honor of how nice it was there – we try to stay as mindless and unaware as we can, as much of the time as we can. I guess that really isn't very strange. The reality beyond innocence is too much to handle undiluted. One of the great discoveries, for me, was the realization that you do not have to drink to go through life in a stupor. Sobriety ain't so bad; you just have to learn how to handle it. I meet lots of people more asleep sober than I was drunk.

How far is it from Eden to Gethsemane? Nobody can say for sure, but a day came when Jesus walked into that other Garden. There was a tree in that Garden too – the tree of the knowledge of God's Kingdom first. “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your strength – and him only shall you serve.*” We already had the words. But they do not work from East of Eden – with us still in control and still scared half to death. Willpower is not enough if we are still caught in the Alienation Syndrome – still in SIN.

I know that some people want to think that Jesus was never kicked out of Eden. “Let’s stick with tooth fairies and virgin births and pastel shades,” they say, “and anything to warm the heart, whether it has any meaning or reality or not.” *Nobody* ever travels from Eden to Gethsemane by accident, or innocent of the issues, or unaware of what is at stake. Eden is Paradise, but mindless. Gethsemane is temptation – the ultimate testing – but in total awareness. In Eden, there is no choice. In Gethsemane, choice is the only thing there is.

So Jesus chose – not just in that moment, but as in all others – He chose *again* according to all He had tracked and known and become since His baptism – the awakening – the New LIFE with God. Jesus chose to obey God, against all odds – against all the pressures in and out of this world – but nevertheless because He *wanted* to. No law could require it. No law could even support it. No fear of God could have been motive enough. No coercion can exist in Gethsemane. The choice was as willful as Adam’s, only this time it came in full conscious awareness. “*Nevertheless, not my will but YOUR will be done.*” Eden is innocent, willful, self-centered reaction: I want what I want when I want it. Gethsemane is totally conscious, willful, and willing obedience.

“Lord God, my will bows to Your will.”
(Not good enough.)

“Lord God, Your will has become my will.”
(Not true enough.)

“Lord God, above all things – all earthly realities, all truth
and fear and death – I love and I trust YOU.”
(God back in first place.)

The two Gardens stand at either side of the full spectrum of LIFE: from rebellion to reconciliation; from instinct to conscious responsibility; from the Natural Man to the Spiritual Man. To go from Eden to Gethsemane is to go from fear to faith ... from innocence to self-awareness ... from pride to humility ... from Law to LOVE. And most of all, it is a choosing to let God be our God again.

Gethsemane is a long way from Eden, and it is often as scary as things can get in this world. But it is the only way out of the curses and into healing, and back to God. How far is it from Eden to Gethsemane? In our world, it can sometimes seem strange that

anybody would want to follow Jesus. Do you really think that most of the human race wants to take this Journey? You think Christianity is for everybody, and that if the WAY is not made to sound simple and appealing enough to attract everybody, then something is wrong with the WAY? Oh, it IS for everybody. But it is not for those who need it. It is only for those who want it.

Who would want to take such a Journey? You can never tell for sure. Humans are strange creatures. It might even be somebody like you.

PRAYER

Thank You, Lord God, for all the unpleasant things of creation. For all the times we try to get away with it, and get caught. For the shame we feel when we do not act like Your people should. For the guilt we suffer when we hurt others. For the pain that warns us we are going in the wrong direction.

Thank You for the fear which reminds us that we are not the highest authority. For the loneliness that makes us seek solace beyond ourselves. For the despair that will not settle for false answers. For all the urgent longings that call us back to life.

We praise You for wanting us to be with You – for giving us no rest or peace or joy until we turn to seek life with You.

Thank You, Lord God, for Your mercy – in all the pleasant and unpleasant things of life. By the grace of Jesus Christ, our Savior, we turn to LIFE with You, praying together as He taught us to, saying, *“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”*

JESUS & MOSES

We will go all the way back to Abraham next week. Today I call you to contemplate the effect – the impact – of the life of Moses on the boy Jesus. Abraham is the Father of Faith – the Father of Judaism. But Moses is the Founder. With Abraham, our faith became a possibility. With Moses, it became a reality – a Covenant People – “Let’s stop fooling around and do it.”

Well, “fooling around” is hardly accurate in application to the Patriarchs. And Brewster, Bradford, Cotton, and the others were hardly “fooling around” when they left everything and risked everything to come to a new world (America) in the hope of shaping a more faithful society. The early Puritans were like Abraham and the Patriarchs. But our country was “founded” by George Washington. I don’t mean he did it without God or the people, but he was the agent. He was the miracle-worker. It was impossible: He had no chance. He was out-classed at every point. There were never enough men or supplies to defy the British army. His friends betrayed him; the Congress would not pay his troops; his men kept deserting; the outcome was obvious and disastrous. George just kept on losing, and retreating, and losing ... until he won. George and his army were so pathetic, the British never could take him seriously.

Moses is the George Washington of Judaism. What did he have going for him? An unreliable brother, and an unstable walking stick that kept thinking it was a serpent. And if you know anything about the Garden of Eden, you know that serpents are not always to be trusted. Of course, Moses had friends in high places, but that was altogether unseen and uncertain. So with this, Moses walked into the presence of Pharaoh, the most powerful leader of the most powerful empire on earth, and said, “*The Unknown, the unseeable says, ‘Let my people go.’*”

All Pharaoh had to do was snap his fingers and Moses would be no more. But Pharaoh could not take him seriously. It was amusing, even entertaining – at first. The story says God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. That means Pharaoh was proud. He could not imagine that there could be any threat to his might and power – never mind from this false prince, turned Bedouin, with delusions of grandeur.

But Moses kept losing, and retreating, and insisting ... until he won. How could that possibly happen? Simple: The Unseen One was real. So the slaves went out of Egypt. And on the Holy Mountain in the wilderness, they received the Covenant – they married the Unseen One, becoming his People, for better or for worse ... and forever. A lot of it has been for worse, because they would not keep the Covenant (Torah). But breaking the precepts does not break the Covenant itself, not with this God. The connection holds – however tenuous, however denied. At least it has for the last thirty-three hundred years or so.

What would a young Jewish boy from Nazareth think about Moses? A boy more thoughtful, more sensitive, more connected to the history and religion of His people than most any boy you can imagine? Moses – the delivered one who delivered others. That was the very essence of his name. He had been saved as a baby in the bulrushes, when Pharaoh had ordered his men to kill all the male babies of the Hebrews. Later we would tell stories to claim that Jesus was a new Moses: how He also escaped being killed when all the male babies were being slaughtered; how His parents would take Him to Egypt, that He might come out of Egypt like His great forebear had.

Moses grew up like a young prince in Egypt. But he murdered an Egyptian guard who was mistreating the Hebrews, and then fled into the vast wilderness of Sinai, and perhaps beyond. For many years he was a nomad, attached to a Midianite priest named Jethro, and he married Jethro's daughter, Zipporah (bird). He had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. A quiet, peaceful, uneventful life – perhaps the only happy years of his life – until that day on the slopes of the mountain, when Moses ran into the Living God. Then the delivered one became The Deliverer – plagues and Passover, Torah and testing – and out of it Judaism was formed and founded.

Thirteen or fourteen hundred years later, the boy Jesus was trying to understand. Could any mortal man be greater than Moses? Could God do more to show compassion and caring for the world than he did through Moses and the release from Egypt? Could God in any way make his will plainer than he did in the Covenant? It was all so clear and beautiful and compelling. And no human could have dreamed it up or pulled it off. It was a beacon to the whole world – a light to the nations. Incredible!

So how do you explain the Roman soldiers all over Israel so many generations later? How do you explain the endless defeats by Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians? How do you explain the split between North and South, and the bitter civil wars? How do you explain the long list of wicked and apostate kings, the continuing idolatry, the endless injustice against everything Torah commanded? For that matter, how do you explain the long history that also contained times of incredible heroism, faithfulness, and sacrifice ... but for what? For this travesty of a holy nation, with bad priests, rotten kings, and a corrupt temple? And what manner of future or hope did Israel have now? Moses was real, but what had it all come to? Where was the God who had delivered them from Egypt so long ago? What chance was there for any kind of deliverance that would last now?

You don't think little boys think such thoughts? This one did! Year after year. I suspect the inner game – deadly earnest – seldom stopped for long. Could we start another rebellion? What would come of it? Could we reform the temple? How long would it last? Would God raise up a new Moses? What could a Moses do in this situation? What kind of hope could ever last in this world? Was there no help for all the suffering and confusion and despair?

Then came John the Baptist and his incredible reform: Let's go back to the Jordan, wash all the past away, come into the Promised Land again, clean – only this time, to keep the Covenant – to really mean it. The Covenant was wonderful, but already it was clear: people could not keep it – not well enough to make the difference. “God, why don't you do something?! Why don't you send us a new leader, a new Moses!?” Well, Jesus came out of the water ... and the dove descended ... and God said, “*I am* doing something, and it's you.”

You cannot be a new Moses if you do not know and revere the first Moses. That is the purpose of these sermons. Jesus did not come out of nowhere. You cannot start from scratch. If you love a Jesus who loved Moses, are you not also connected to Moses? You do know, I presume, that the first four generations of Christians – Jew, Greek, or whatever – had only the Old Testament for Scripture. They continued to study it, or started to study it if they had not before, because they knew it was the context out of which Jesus came. Only once was there a serious attempt to delete the Old Testament from Christian Scripture: Marcion wanted only the Gospel of Luke and the letters of Paul to be

Holy Scripture for Christians. The entire church rose up and said, “This is ignorant, stupid, and wrong.” It was the first heresy. (Marcion was expelled from the church in 144 A.D.) Yet in *our* time, the vast majority of Christians are perpetrating this very heresy, not by conviction but by sloth. They do not try to delete the Old Testament from their Bible; they simply do not bother to read or ponder it. Heresy by default. Sometimes we pray about it on Communion Sunday: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done.” We know more about movie stars, famous today and forgotten tomorrow – some of them not even great spiritual giants – but we have no time for Moses, or Jeremiah?

Jesus is the New Moses – a Moses of a different dimension. It is the major theme of the Gospel of Matthew. It is a frequent awareness in all Christian perspective. Moses established the Covenant on Mount Sinai. Jesus establishes a New Covenant, only it is on the inside, on the heart – a life of prayer for every believer. Moses tried to establish a Holy Nation on earth – a nation that would become a light to all the nations. Jesus tries to establish a Kingdom not of this world – a people – a faith family not married to place or possessions or political success. This world can neither create nor kill Christendom. Judaism, by the way, ended up being this way too, though that was not its dream. We are, after all, from the same God, the same principles, and the same purpose – and we will be joined again one day, as the NEW Testament states and reiterates over and over again.

Nevertheless, to see the key (oversimplified): Jesus takes what Moses did and translates it from the physical world to the spiritual dimension. Moses delivered the people from an evil Pharaoh – from earthly slavery. Jesus delivers from spiritual bondage – sin, death, and the Devil. Moses declared that the great goal was moving into the Promised Land, where the Covenant would be enacted and demonstrated. Jesus talks about a Promised Land of a different dimension – eternity in Heaven. Moses revealed a Law – a pattern of behavior – that all must keep and that, if kept, would bring peace and prosperity and a good life to everybody on earth. Jesus reveals a Gospel – a relationship with the Holy Spirit – that each individual carries “in the heart.” And it is to guide each person in a world that will neither honor nor understand such love and behavior. Moses thought that life on earth could be redeemed, could be made beautiful – if we would all obey the Covenant. Jesus knows that life here will never be good – that obeying God will get us

into even more trouble than ever – but He invites us to be redeemed ... to let ourselves be changed by the presence of God ... to live for an unseen Kingdom no matter what is going on all around us.

Every Christian is supposed to know that the ethical precepts of the Torah are right and good, and that behavior which falls beneath this standard is unacceptable to any of God's people. But the Christian knows that life is subtle, and that this realm is alienated from God. Therefore, the Holy Spirit may have many instructions, assignments, appeals, and requests that go beyond, or put new perspective on, what we are to be about on any given day or situation. Often we fall back on Torah when the channels are clogged and we cannot "hear" or "feel" the Spirit's guidance. But we are living servants of the living Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Nothing stays static or cut-and-dried for very long.

Hopefully you are seeing, if you have not already seen it for years, that the parallels are numerous, if not endless: Deliverance from earthly slavery, and deliverance from spiritual bondage. Torah, and Gospel. Covenant on the mountain, and Sermon on the Mount. A holy nation, and a holy spiritual community. Promised Land, and Heaven. Prosperity on earth, and prosperity for eternity.

Thoughtful Christians have long believed that Jesus came to fulfill Judaism, not to split it. But in a broken world, things tend to break. However much we work for reconciliation, the reality of that great hope and promise is not in our hands, and often not in our power. That is no excuse whatsoever for us not to go on receiving it, living for it, working for reconciliation – our own reconciliation with God, and our own reconciliation with whoever is willing to seek it with us.

In the maze of such vast parallels between Jesus and Moses, I would like to leave you with three more-specific pictures.

1) The first one comes from Jesus' teachings, and I include it to make it clear that Jesus did think about such things. First of all, while in the wilderness years (Numbers 21:8), the Israelites came into a region full of poisonous snakes. If we had more time, we might explore the connection between their bitching and complaining and the appearance of the poisonous snakes. In any case, it got pretty terrifying, and a number of them had died from the snakebites. Naturally they wanted Moses to pray about it and ask God to remove the snakes. Moses prayed, and there are huge principles of prayer revealed in what

happened. The Lord did not remove the snakes. The snakes were the result of all their rebellion, backbiting, negative attitudes, etc. The snakes would go when they stopped being rebellious, backbiting, and negative, and changed their attitudes. But God told Moses to make a bronze serpent (*Nehushtan*) so that when the people were bitten, they could look at the bronze serpent and save their lives. “You are going to go on being bitten, but you do not have to die.” Sometimes God seems pretty harsh to us. But if you reward bitching and complaining, where does it end?

Anyway, whether that registers or not, Jesus (John 3:14) compares Himself to the bronze serpent in the wilderness. Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin who has come to Him in the night. Jesus says that like Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so Jesus must be lifted up – on the Cross – so that those bitten by the spiritual death of this world may see Him, and discover eternal life.

2) “*The day of Pentecost had come, and they were all together in one place.*” (Acts 2:1) Many Christians, at least around here, know the story of the birthday of the church. After the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the disciples were instructed to wait in Jerusalem until they were clothed with power from on high. Jesus had given them plenty of indications (though they did not really understand it beforehand) that after His death and resurrection, He would come to them as Holy Spirit – Paraclete – Counselor – to be with them “unto the end of the age.” The coming of the Holy Spirit is what moves the Christian Faith from the story of the individual (Jesus) to a world religion – to a spiritual WAY of Life that all His followers are invited into and participate in. We call it Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Holy *Nephesh*.

Only, the story starts out, “*The day of Pentecost had come.*” Pentecost was already here before Pentecost? Yes, of course. The Feast of Weeks – first fruits of the wheat harvest – one of the three great religious festivals of Judaism. Why “Pentecost”? It comes fifty days after the first day of Passover. Why would celebrating the wheat harvest be such a high religious celebration? It is a day of great thanksgiving, I am told. Well, we have a Thanksgiving Day in our culture, and some people think it has religious overtones. But is there any spiritual significance to Pentecost in the Jewish tradition? Well, they rejoice that there will

be food to eat. And some of my Jewish friends leave it right there. Lots of my American friends leave it right there with our Thanksgiving Day too, so how can I complain? Of course, in our day, lots of Jews do not know any more about Judaism than many Christians know about Christianity. So maybe nobody is being obtuse or misleading us on purpose.

Shavuot. Fifty days after the Exodus, the Israelites received the Torah on Mount Sinai. Can you hear the thunderclap? There were quite a few of those! It was the end and objective of all God had started and accomplished from the time Moses first saw that burning bush. Most of the world today and even half of Judaism try to pretend that God just freed the people from Egypt as an object lesson against slavery. Well, good. I believe God hates slavery too. But after they were freed, then what?! Freedom is its own slavery if it has no rhyme or reason or purpose or dedication. God had more in mind from the beginning. *“Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?’ God said, ‘But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.’”* (Exodus 3:12)

Pentecost is the WEDDING – the celebration of the marriage between God and Israel. They take vows together. Torah is given and received on Pentecost. Don’t you find it just a little bit interesting that Jesus chooses this day for His followers to receive – to be given – the Holy Spirit? Is there some way to miss the realization that Jesus is raising the ante, from Old Covenant to New Covenant – from Torah to indwelling Holy Spirit – and on purpose? “I am the New Moses – this is the New Covenant, written on your hearts.” Why do they call the church “The Bride of Christ”? Pentecost is about weddings – sealing the bonds – both the Old Pentecost and the New. Only, there is a slight jump in dimensions. Don’t you find that just a little bit interesting?

3) If I asked you what was the most dramatic moment in Moses’ story, what would you say? Some people say it was the crossing of the Red (Reed) Sea. Who is to say they are wrong? It is at least the top runner for the most stupid move in all world history on the part of the Egyptians. I mean, the slaves had been freed – they had gone off because of the might and mayhem of some power far greater than Pharaoh himself. Then at the last minute came this bright idea: “We have lost our firstborn; let’s not lose our slaves as well. Maybe the power that wrested

them from us will have gone to sleep.” So off went the soldiers after the slaves. Stupid, and they all died. So when did Judaism celebrate the parting of the Reed Sea? They didn’t! It is a minor appendage to the story, an anticlimax. The real drama had already taken place.

When did Israel celebrate its release from bondage? Passover! That’s the big one. The death of the firstborn was what finally secured their release from bondage. Pharaoh’s own evil had brought down the wrath of God on Pharaoh and his people. There had been warning after warning ... plague after plague ... appeal after appeal. Finally they were given a way to escape the disaster: blood on the doorpost and lintel was a sign of obedience – acknowledgment that the firstborn belonged to God. The Egyptians could have saved their children too, by the way.

So, what is Passover in the story of the New Moses? There is no escape – no blood on doorpost or lintel can save the firstborn Son of God. For the first Moses there was Passover. For the New Moses there is Crucifixion. And once again, the timing does not allow us to claim accident or coincidence. The dimensional leap is staggering. From our firstborn to his firstborn. The transformation of principle knocks the breath out of us. At least it does mine. I try to grasp it, and think I will never be able to breathe again. At least not for fifty days – when the *Nephesh* comes again ... and far clearer than ever before. What was won, or bought, by the blood of the Passover? What is won, or bought, by the blood of the New Moses, the firstborn Son of God? It is not a competition. They are not in a fight. The first lays the groundwork which illuminates and makes possible the second.

PRAYER

We have never been on the Mount of Transfiguration, Lord. Never heard You talking with Moses – never have known what the two of you said to each other. But it seems pretty clear that you were friends. Everywhere through Old and New Testament, it seems pretty clear that you were friends.

We wonder why that does not seem more obvious to more people. We wonder why it does not seem obvious to us sometimes, or why we sometimes forget it altogether. And since any friend of Yours is a friend of ours, well, we hope we will not forget it so easily in the future.

We want to thank You also now for all the amazing dimensions there were to Your life here on earth. We have been thinking about it for many years now, and still it surprises us at times, catches us off guard, inspires us, and also sometimes shames and judges us. We know You are far more than the stories we know about You – that Your mercy and love and reconciliation are even greater than all we have experienced so far. So we pray that You will continue to teach us how to trust and love You. And because we already do, insofar as we have awakened to Your grace, we are grateful. Amen.

JESUS & ABRAHAM

Abraham is the Father: Father of Faith ... Father of Judaism ... Father of fathers. If we spoke Hebrew, it would be unmistakable: In Hebrew, Abram (*avram*) means “exalted father.” How do you get bigger than that? Increase the territory. *Avraham* means “father of multitudes” – father of nations. Though a few prophets and teachers warned against assuming it carelessly or claiming it as a protection despite faithless living, it has long been assumed that being “children of Abraham” was assurance of being “God’s Chosen People” – heirs of The Promise, a guarantee of a place in Heaven. Certainly this was the widespread belief in Jesus’ day.

You may remember Jesus’ story about the rich man and Lazarus. (Luke 16:20) We have no time for that story today, except to note that Jesus pictures Abraham as the one who welcomes and comforts people in Heaven. Not St. Peter – Abraham. Of course, this is only according to Jesus – a thing, maybe, some Christians ought to ponder ...

We have been working on the premise, in recent sermons, that Jesus was not only Jewish and a product of Judaism, but that He had pondered and prayed and studied His heritage until He saw dimensions to it which few others had, and that He had felt its purpose and passion beyond what any others had. By the way, Siddhartha Gautama did much the same thing in the context of Hinduism. One is called *The Buddha* – the Enlightened One. The other is called *The Christ* – the Anointed One.

So what is Jesus’ view of Abraham? It is one of great honor and respect, as should not surprise us. It is also clear that Jesus sees Abraham as founder and headwaters of something far beyond Judaism. God’s plans and purposes are always bigger than ours. Perhaps Jesus has taken His lead from Isaiah. In any case, it is clear. In Matthew 8:10-12, Jesus has just healed a Roman centurion’s servant. A Roman centurion is, of course, an outsider, a gringo, a pagan. Jesus is surprised and delighted by the centurion’s faith. *“When Jesus heard him, he marveled, and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.”* Scandalous! Jesus

is picturing hordes of people from all over the world, and from far beyond Judaism, sitting at table – table fellowship means total inclusion and acceptance – sitting at table with Abraham ... with the Fathers! Abraham is Father and host to a far wider circle than is usually imagined. I mean, we might as well try to suggest that there will be people beyond the Christian definitions – people we do not think of as baptized or converted – who will be “sitting at table” in Heaven with Peter and Paul, with Abraham, and with the others. Remember John 10:16? *“Other sheep I have, not of this fold.”*

In our efforts to understand, to cooperate, and to grow in the Faith, we are forever making definitions and explanations that tend to lock down things that are not locked down. Those who really know – like Jesus – know that God is much bigger than human constructs and institutions. If we have no “religion,” we do not seriously participate in the drama of faith and salvation. But having a religion, the religion itself should keep reminding us that God’s plans and purposes are far beyond our tiny comprehension and constructs.

Point number one: Jesus reveres and honors Abraham, and in no way reduces his importance. Just the opposite. Jesus greatly increases Abraham’s importance. That is, Jesus sees Abraham as God’s way of starting something which will become far bigger than one religion in the world – important as that is. And even at this moment in time, three world religions claim Abraham as source and Father. The world keeps making definitions and limits and squeezing things down to manageable proportions. So God keeps breaking it open again. He does it with Jesus, and with the prophets before Him, and with the apostles after Him. The followers of Jesus also keep defining it and squeezing it down ... until the Holy Spirit of Jesus has to blow open the borders again – with Cornelius, with Paul, with a Reformation and then a Counter-Reformation, with Pope John the 23rd – and I hope, with you.

By the way, the Apostle Paul took his lead from Jesus (as he did a lot more often than some people want to acknowledge), so Paul also saw Abraham as the forerunner of the Christian Faith – that is, as the one who first based everything on faith, and gave us authority for putting grace and Gospel ahead of circumcision and Law. *“Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to*

Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed' ... that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." (Galatians 3:6-14; Romans 4:2-13) Well, that is too short and fast, perhaps. But when I hear things like that, all the borders break loose, and all the bells in the world start chiming.

We were going to talk about Jesus and Abraham. In a way, we have been warming up to it. But it is too broad and general, and we are speaking of conclusions that come after years of study. I do not mean *my* study, for pity's sake; I mean Jesus', and Paul's, and Augustine's, and Luther's, and John Cotton's, and Jonathan Edwards'. At the end there, I threw in a couple of brilliant and famous Congregationalists that some of you have never heard of. I do not do that to insult you, by the way. Who has ever tried to teach you anything about your Congregational heritage? If I live long enough, I might try to do something about that – so that you can do with your heritage what Jesus did with His. Anyway, despite the offense and all of our reluctance, we must work our way back into Abraham's situation.

The year was maybe 2000 B.C. Judaism had not been invented yet. God had it designed, but humans had not caught on yet. Abraham was the first likely-looking prospect God had found to bring the design into reality. God had been putting a lot of extra time and attention into Abraham for that very reason. Abraham was the beginning, but this would not be true if his beginning did not remind all of us of our own "beginnings." God starts spending time and attention on us too. We feel ourselves being invited into some "new country" – into living a different WAY, for different reasons. God's presence always increases awareness. Life is bigger than we thought – it is about more than we thought – and we cannot stay the same.

On the surface of it, all that could be seen by others was erratic behavior. Abraham was impetuous. He took sudden long journeys. He piled rocks into heaps in odd places. He had this "Freudian thing" about cutting the foreskin off the male members of his clan. He spent long hours brooding in silence. Some people wondered if maybe he was a little flipped. But wherever he went, he seemed to prosper. The people under him did not mind a *little* aberration, as long as the food was abundant and the protection seemed good.

On the inside, Abraham was wrestling with this strange inner “presence” – a kind of “voice”: Pack up everything you own and go live in the land beyond the great desert – Canaan. Now go to Egypt. Now go back to Canaan. Keep out of Sodom and Gomorrah. Build a big heap of stones here in my honor. Circumcise all the male members of your tribe. Keep doing all that I command you, and I will make a great nation of you and your offspring.

Abraham knew that something strange and important was going on. He did not always understand what, and he never knew how. But somehow God had started something with him. There was a covenant between them. There was to be a new nation and a new religion. It all hinged upon a promised son.

When Isaac finally arrived, unusually late in life, Abraham knew the covenant had been sealed. It had been harder and harder to keep believing the promise, as years had gone by and he had grown older and older. But now it was clear again that all the strange directives had been for real. It was going to happen as promised. And then Abraham's real turmoil began.

All around him, for all of his life, Abraham had lived in the midst of cultures and religions that believed in child sacrifice. He had grown up in such a religion. The gods were not to be taken lightly. Improper or insufficient sacrifice meant wrath and disaster. Abraham began to wonder what requirements would be made by the God who had been dealing with him. The thought scared him beyond utterance. God was worthy of our highest gift, and had a right to any gift that he might ask for. The highest gift was the firstborn son. Devoting the firstborn son was a sign of allegiance and acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. And so Abraham could not think straight anymore. Doubtless he tried to put it out of his head. And doubtless he had as much luck with that as you or I have with some of the fears that we can neither face nor leave alone.

So God put Abraham to the test. That is the way the story reads. (And we hear it, remember, from Abraham's perspective.) I suspect that God decided it was time to bring the issue to a head before Abraham's fear clouded everything and ruined the plan. Nevertheless, Abraham concluded that Isaac must be sacrificed. Other religions and other worshippers were willing to make such high sacrifices. Should his faith and devotion be less? Should he love God any less? Who comes first, God or the children? Abraham owed his God everything. He had obeyed him

for too many years to change now. Isaac must be sacrificed. What happened after that was up to God.

So Abraham went into the wilderness, as the story says, and literally put his son's life into the hands of God. Please note: God went along with it until there was no more doubt in Abraham's mind about his own obedience. That was the only way Abraham would ever get free of his doubt and fear. For his own sake, Abraham had to know that his willingness to obey God was unconditional. Only after Abraham had reached that point could God's true purpose come to light. If God had moved too soon, Abraham would never have known for sure whether he had really understood, or merely copped-out. God, perhaps, has that problem with some of us? Only, we will not go into the wilderness to find out whether our doubts are real or imagined. So we blame God forever for motives and expectations we have only imagined and then projected onto him.

Abraham was in for a wonderful surprise. Abraham put his son's life into the hands of God, and discovered that he had it all wrong. God did not want that kind of sacrifice. God wanted life and abundance, not death and sorrow. It was one of the first major breakthroughs into the mind and heart of God. On God's altar, Isaac was safe – safer than anywhere else in the world. And slowly but surely, God used that moment to rid the world of child sacrifice. Today the world's attitude toward child sacrifice is so reversed that some of you can hardly hear the story of Abraham and Isaac. But Abraham's world would have been shocked that God did *not* require the sacrifice – so shocked that at first they did not believe that Abraham had gotten it right. (Well, children are still being sacrificed on other altars, and God is still working on that. But they are no longer being sacrificed on the altars that belong to God.)

So the story continued, and Judaism came into being. For two thousand years – whenever faith was strong enough to dare, and willingness was real – the people discovered that God was not like what people feared he was like. God was not the enemy. (Power does not always corrupt.) The Almighty was a puzzle. Nobody was absolutely sure, and few are even yet, but the possibility and the awareness were growing that the motives of the Almighty might be good – maybe even loving.

Deep into the same drama, but later in history, another Father took a similar kind of risk. On the surface it would not seem like it should have been a very great risk. Abraham, after all, had good reason to be

alarmed. Everyone in the world feared the power of the gods. Humans, on the other hand, are benevolent, courageous, kind, patient, forgiving, hard-working, and long only for progress and improvement. Humans have good motives. Ask any of them anywhere. They will tell you that they have only the best of motives. Methods may be troublesome, but motives are no problem.

One group of humans – with only the highest of motives – had been dreaming, praying, asking, and waiting for a Leader of exceptional wisdom and ability to come and help them fulfill their own destiny and bring peace and progress to the whole world. They had waited and hoped and asked for such a Leader for years – for generations. On the surface, it would not seem like it should have been at all risky to send such a Leader. God is dangerous and unpredictable, while humans are safe and caring and have high motives. And besides, they had begged and prayed most fervently, promising total support if only the Leader would be sent.

So another Father took the risk, and put his Son into the hands of humans. Only, this time the sacrifice was not waived. In fear and mistrust, in pride and anger, humans killed the Son of God. The Leader of Peace and Love was utterly rejected. Nothing is safe on man's altar. There is no place more dangerous in all the world.

Two altars – two sacrifices – two sons. Do you suppose that Jesus was oblivious to the parallel and contrast? Not hardly! He picked up the ancient theme and lived it through to completion – He filled in the other side of the story so we could see the truth, if we wanted to. Do you want to know where to expect love and mercy, and where to expect animosity and pain? Do you want to know who is for LIFE, and who brings death? Do you want to know where to be surprised by love, and where to be surprised by hatred? Check the two altars – the two sacrifices – the two sons. God is not the enemy. And unless something overcomes our fear and alienation from God, WE are the enemy.

That is what the Bible has always been about. Not very surprising, then, to find that it is what *Jesus* is about. He picks up the deep themes, absorbs them, carries them to new dimensions. And not just piecemeal, here and there. Not just from Adam, or Moses, or Abraham, but from the entire history and tradition of His people. Though today we are only looking at Jesus and Abraham.

It was not enough, this business of God being magnanimous and not requiring the sacrifice. You would think, in a way, that it would have taught us a lot more about God than it did. But somehow it didn't take, or wouldn't stick. Neither did all the other times God tried to reveal mercy and love. Somehow, humanity was not involved deeply enough in the drama. It is a LIFE or DEATH issue – but seeing God as holy, aloof, and controlling everything from a distance makes it too easy for us to pretend we are not directly involved. We are spectators off on the side, amusing ourselves while God is somewhere in the main arena doing God's thing. We are just surviving, and waiting to hear news of the outcome of the big event: Did God win peace and love and joy for us, or is God still struggling with it? That is, must we go on suffering in our innocence for a little longer?

So God had to get more dramatic – had to show us that we are in the main event and part of the major drama all the way. He had become a handy excuse – the ONE to blame for all that happened. So one year, around the time when B.C. was turning into A.D., God said: “Okay, you are in it all the way – up to your eyeballs, and to the core of your own soul. I put my Son in your hands. That is all the leadership and all the love you could ever use or hope to find. No more excuses. It is up to you what you do with it – up to each one of you what you decide to do with LIFE.”

It did not seem to help at first. But it made the picture very clear. God is not the problem, and God is not the enemy. We are. And since that time, all the projections we have put onto God about wrath and vengeance and punishment have been breaking up. They cannot stand in the face of what happened on that Cross ... and the forgiveness that came anyway.

So we have lost the fear-and-punishment picture by the experience of grace and love. Yet with that, we have gained the full weight of our frightening responsibility: Who is to blame? From the Cross onward ... we are! Grace and mercy carry with them this price. We lose God's wrath and get invited into eternal life. But in return, we have to face our own evil – and find redemption – or die in it. And if we do not like high and complicated theological constructs, all we have to do is ask ourselves: In our experience of life so far, where has most of our pain, sorrow, rejection, and travail come from? Has it come from God, or from human beings? God's altar seems frightening to us, but we are really quite safe

there. It is, in fact, the safest place on earth. But nothing is safe on man's altar – not the trees, not the animals, not even the humans ... not even the Son of God.

One more thing, while we are on the subject: When God finally decides to do a thing, it stays done. We have all wondered at times, I suspect, what *we* would have done if we had been alive back in Palestine in the days of Jesus. How would we have reacted if we had been the ones into whose hands God had put the life of his Son? But strangely enough, that is one thing we do not need to wonder about. When God does something, it stays done. The life of the Son *is* put into our hands. That is, we each still have our chance to react and respond to Jesus in whatever way we choose – and as much in our time as Peter or Paul or anyone else did in their time.

A lot of people seem to have no conscious awareness of this. Yet it stays done anyway. Ignorance of The Law is no excuse, as we all know. Well, ignorance of The Love is no excuse either! It is done, and it stays done.

Not totally, and not forever, but in this realm, here and now – because we are free to choose, because we are LOVED – we have God's life in our hands. As much as we will receive of God's life is with us to do with what we will, each and every day. And together, we have even more of God's life in our hands. What shall we do with the reversed sacrifice? We are seeing it all the time. And we will go on seeing it, for what we do with it becomes our heritage and our history – who and what we truly are ... and what our world is like.

JESUS & ISAIAH

It is difficult to say anything about the prophets if we do not get oriented. As you know, history bunches up. It is not precise, but things go in cycles. Abraham is the Father. Put Abraham at 2000 B.C. Maybe it was closer to 1800, but if you want to talk about four thousand years ago, are you comfortable with precision? Besides, 2000 is easier to remember. Abraham is 2000 B.C. King David and the Golden Age of Israel is 1000 B.C. Another thousand years brings us to Jesus. When you become a biblical scholar, you can get more precise.

What about increments of five hundred years? What happens *between* Abraham and David? About five hundred years after Abraham, we get Moses: Joseph ... slavery in Egypt ... Passover ... Torah ... Covenant on the mountain. Religion does assign meaning to life. “Creator” *means* intelligent design – just for openers. By the way, without religion, there is no meaning or purpose to life. No Creator – no design or purpose. It’s just here; in the long run, it doesn’t matter.

Our story – our religion and history and tradition – starts with Abraham. But then the whole affair falls into this huge black pit – slavery in Egypt. All is lost. Finally God bails us out, dusts us off, renews the PLAN – reinstates the Promise and the Covenant – makes it even clearer. At 1000 B.C. we behold the United Kingdom of Israel: King David. The plan and destiny are finally working and in place. We are confident and successful at last.

What happens five hundred years *after* Jesus? Christianity has taken over the Western World; the Emperor Constantine has converted; churches are everywhere; it’s all coming up roses. But halfway between Jesus and the First Millennium (roughly), it all falls apart. The Roman Empire folds and goes under. Augustine gives Christendom a different vision just in the nick of time, or how would the story have survived the mayhem? Actually, Augustine returns us to a former vision, THE CITY OF GOD: “*My Kingdom is not of this world.*”

What else happens between Jesus and the First Millennium? Muhammad is born. Ishmael is back with a vengeance. Islam soon owns most of the lands of Christendom. (But for Charlemagne, it would have owned them all.) Gregory the Great, the greatest of the Popes, is contemporary with Muhammad.

What happens between then and now? Another five hundred years brings us to the 1500s, give or take a hundred years. It is one of the most dramatic periods in our history. The church is corrupt and rotten, and most everybody knows it. We have fallen into another kind of black pit. For a while, like with every black pit, it looks like all is lost – God has abandoned us – we are through – it is over. Then all hell breaks loose: Reformation, Counter-Reformation, renewal. Luther, Calvin, Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross. By the way, Michelangelo is a contemporary of Luther. Columbus, and a new world, are part of the mix. Luther and Muhammad have the same birthday, by the way – November 10th – except one thousand years apart. Muhammad is five hundred years after Jesus; Luther is fifteen hundred years after Jesus. Anyway, fifteen hundred years after Jesus, we get this dramatic upheaval and renewal – giant players on the board – and the repercussions impact everything. They are still playing themselves out today.

Jumping back up, what happened about fifteen hundred years after Abraham – that is, about halfway between David and Jesus? Another of the most dramatic periods in religious history: Buddha, Lao Tsu, Confucius, Socrates, Zoroaster, and the great Hebrew prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah). Somebody must have put something in the water! When do we always get such amazing religious leaders? When the religious institutions are corrupt and rotten; when the hope is dead or dying; when we have fallen into a black pit and God realizes that we are not going to get out on our own.

The Hebrew prophets do not actually predict the future; they reveal the plan and purpose of God. They call the people to renewal and commitment, and speak the word of repentance and reform: Get back on track. Get back to the plan. Get back to who you really are, and what you are supposed to be about. They remind people of God's will and purpose, and insist that God's will and purpose are still viable and that the Promise is still waiting for fulfillment. They mention all the ways in which people have abandoned God and the Covenant. They insist that our trouble is not because God has stopped loving the people, but because the people have stopped loving God.

The prophets are unpopular, as you can imagine. None of them are famous or honored or listened to – until after they are dead. They stand apart from the political structures, however deeply concerned they are about them. They risk life and limb to carry their message, and are

frequently persecuted, punished, tortured, and killed. They are dramatic, frequently acting out their messages as well as speaking them.

Hosea, for instance, married a prostitute (Gomer) on purpose to demonstrate what God was going through “in his faithless marriage with Israel.” Does God hate divorce? The Jewish answer was, “We better hope so, or we’re all dead!” Gomer kept running off, and Hosea kept forgiving her and taking her back, sermonizing all the while about the parallel with God and Israel. Gomer had children, and Hosea gave them interesting names, like *Lo Ammi*, which means “I don’t know where this one came from, but it’s no child of mine.” In prophetic language, that means “You are not producing legitimate fruit. Stop screwing around with all your idols and false gods, and come home to Yahweh.”

One thing Jesus learned from the prophets is that you don’t just talk about it, you do it – you act it out. Isaiah, for instance, walked around Jerusalem barefoot and stark naked for three years to dramatize his message of the coming judgment at the hands of Assyria. Isaiah had two sons. One he called *Shear-Jashub*: a remnant shall remain (return). The second he called *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*: the spoil speeds – the prey hastens.

Isaiah’s father, Amoz, was the brother of King Amaziah of Judah. In short, Isaiah came from the aristocracy. He had land and wealth. He had it made. All he had to do was keep away from his prayers, and he could have lived a pleasant and successful life, honored by his family and respected by his people. But in 740 B.C., the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah was stricken with a powerful theophany. He realized the unspeakable contrast: the difference between a dead human king and the ever-living “heavenly king.” Isaiah transferred his allegiance to the heavenly king, and his life was never the same again. In the midst of that awakening, Isaiah realized how far he and his people had strayed from their identity and purpose – from their Covenant with God. It staggered him to the core of his being. “*Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.*”

Isaiah was not talking about swearing or cussing. The Word of the Lord was no longer what the Chosen People lived for, carried, learned, or taught. They no longer “meditated on the Torah – on what God wanted of them – day and night,” as they had been instructed to do, and as they had promised to do. So the burning coal – the cleansing, the forgiveness, the conversion – and Isaiah spent the next forty years being the mouthpiece

of God. The pay was poor and the fringe benefits were terrible. An evil king, Manasseh, had Isaiah sawn in two because he did not like his sermons. It keeps me from feeling too sorry for myself when people don't like what I preach.

I have often wondered what it would be like in the church today if we had taken our initiation rite from Isaiah instead of from John the Baptist – if instead of water on the head, we joined the church with a burning coal touched to our lips. I wonder how many of us would still be here. “Well, I’m almost ready to join, but I still have just a couple more questions about Christology before I actually take the final step.” A lot fewer members, I suspect, and a lot more “friends of the church.”

Isaiah spent his entire ministry telling people that despite the prosperity they were enjoying at the moment; despite the confidence they had in a rosy political future; despite their assumptions of God's favor, and their refusal to take seriously their own faithlessness – it was all going to come crashing down around them. Yet he also said that although the tree would be cut down, the stump would remain – a remnant shall remain. And the overriding message of Isaiah (the very meaning of his name) was that God is salvation – and that only God can save. Humans have no such power, whether they are good or evil. Humans cannot save themselves. Humans can wait and pray and be ready to cooperate, but God is salvation and the bringer of salvation. Earthly kings and kingdoms come and go; pin your hopes on the heavenly King, and the heavenly Kingdom. Stay faithful. Be willing to sacrifice, and to suffer any fate that comes – but live for the heavenly King, and the heavenly Kingdom.

Such themes and expectations are huge in Jesus' life and ministry. I think it is mostly from Isaiah (6:10) that Jesus learns not to be surprised when people reject His teaching and preaching – where He learns not to place any confidence on what is happening at any given moment in this world. (Matthew 13:14-15) “An everlasting kingdom,” says Isaiah 9:7. “*My kingdom is not of this world,*” says Jesus. (John 8:23; 18:36) It is a perspective Jesus has absorbed so deeply, we can barely follow it sometimes. And “the remnant” ... the disciple band of faithful followers ... the leaven that keeps changing the world – not because it has overt power in this world, but precisely because it remains faithful to a Kingdom not of this world – Jesus develops that theme far beyond Isaiah. When Jesus trusts His own life to God and goes to the Cross, He also trusts His mission to “the remnant” – to the tiny

band of friends who know and love Him. God is behind it – God is salvation. But “the remnant” is still the method God uses – at least the part of it we see. That is the only reason *we* are here. The only way the whole thing gets carried from then until now – and from them to us – is by this remnant band of faithful friends. The disciples – then and now.

Is that what you think is important too? Do you think that it’s the sign out front, or the charming colonial design? Do you have confidence in the denominational structures, or the fact that so many people are writing books? Do you think Christendom is authentic and will survive because we have so many members worldwide, or because we have so much money, or because our programs are so effective, or because we sing the right songs? It is wonderful when things work right. Earthly success is more pleasant than earthly failure. But is that where any of our trust or confidence lies? The band of friends who love Jesus and share Him and stay loyal to Him – obedient and receptive to His Holy Spirit – that is what keeps it alive. That is what it rests on and depends on. It always has. And if that ever goes, it’s gone! If you are not in such a band, get into one. If you are not in such a band, you only know the head-trip side of Christianity – the theory part without the heart or soul.

Back to Isaiah. Many of us suspect that “Immanuel” was the name of his third son. For forty years, Isaiah carried a message of doom, but its context and purpose always carried a great hope within it: a remnant shall remain; God will save us; a shoot from the stump of Jesse; an everlasting kingdom; God with us – *Immanuel*.

At the fortieth chapter of the Book of Isaiah, the writing shifts to a different message and a different historical context. We suspect it is a Second Isaiah, one hundred and fifty years later – a prophet during the Babylonian Exile; a spiritual leader in the midst of the disaster that Isaiah of Jerusalem had warned was coming. (Well, in general.) Second Isaiah is often considered to be the most profound writer in the Old Testament. From him come images of Israel as a suffering servant, and to the exiles he speaks of comfort, of healing and restoration, and of a great hope. That message of hope was, of course, nearly as unpopular with the exiles who were discouraged and feeling sorry for themselves, as the earlier message of judgment and doom had been to those feeling confident and cocky about their earthly success. As we all know, Jesus takes the suffering servant motif and carries it many dimensions beyond. He takes the theme of Isaiah 61:1-2 as the hallmark and design of His own ministry. “*The spirit of the Lord is upon me*” (Luke 4:18-19)

You are not forgetting, I hope, the main reason I started preaching this series of sermons: Jesus and His friends, Jesus and His heroes, Jesus and His role models. We cannot comprehend Jesus apart from His heritage and tradition. He did not come out of nowhere. He did not design it from scratch. Jesus profoundly ingested, pondered, prayed, contemplated, and absorbed the life and experience of Judaism and its greatest leaders. *He is more* than a composite of Abraham, Joseph, Samuel, the prophets, and all the rest. But *He is not less!* You can feel Isaiah and Jeremiah and Elijah and Moses and their profound influence within Him – unless you know nothing of their stories. It is not vague or accidental. Jesus honors them, loves them, knows them, quotes them, thinks through everything they did and said ... and beyond.

Isaiah lived during the reigns of four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a very good king in a very hard time. He and Isaiah became one of the great prophet/king teams of Israel. During Hezekiah's reign, Assyria did indeed march to conquer Egypt. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed (722 B.C. – Shalmanesser V). Twenty-one years later, the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Hezekiah's domain, was conquered – except for the city of Jerusalem, which, though under siege, never actually fell. It was Isaiah who told Hezekiah not to surrender. When all seemed lost, Isaiah declared that God would defend and deliver the city. This deliverance (II Kings 19:35) is often considered to be one of the greatest miracles in the Old Testament – almost like a second Passover. Sennacherib still claimed to have taken more than two hundred thousand slaves back to Assyria from Judah (701 B.C.). But from certain victory, suddenly the armies were gone and Jerusalem was saved.

Time to summarize: Isaiah lived in Jerusalem in 740 B.C. There had been a civil war nearly two hundred years earlier. It had been more than a political squabble; it had been a terrible blow to faith: How could you go from David to Solomon to civil war? If you were God's Chosen People – God's Holy Nation – how could you split? The Promise was going backward; something must be dreadfully wrong. If it was God's plan to make Israel a Holy Nation, a Light to the World – the hub and focus from which all the nations would come to God and learn to keep his Ways – how could you split? Half the world was supposed to go to Jerusalem, and the other half to Samaria? Half the world would be inspired by the temple in Jerusalem, and the other half by the temple on Mount Gerazim? Naturally, most everybody assumed God would bring Israel

and Judah back together, though few agreed on which half would join the other or how that might happen.

Isaiah was one of a tiny handful of people who came to realize that Israel and Judah were not coming back together. Civil war was only the beginning of decline, and it would get far worse. While everybody had assumed God's Promise meant political and earthly prominence and success, that *was not* and *would not be* the case. It is the world's most classic faith crisis – then and now: If God will not give us what we want him to give us, then what good is God? Why should we worship God? For that matter, why should we pay any attention to God whatsoever?

Isaiah saw the Lord “high and lifted up.” He realized that the world's views about God, and what God was really trying to accomplish, were minuscule and pathetic. All the kingdoms of the earth were too low and slow to matter, in comparison to the glory of God, the blessing of his presence, and the future that really was in store. So Isaiah spent the rest of his life saying, “You are tuned to the wrong channel. Only God can save us. Only an everlasting kingdom matters. This whole place is going up in smoke anyway. Get back to your own faithfulness. Being close with God is everything – *Immanuel* is our only hope. And no matter what you see destroyed, the remnant will remain. It is not what we expected, but the Promise is still good, still at work, still coming – only deeper and more profoundly than anything we imagined. But you have to stop counting on the false picture, or you cannot see the real one.”

Not many people listened to Isaiah in his time. But years later, a young man from Nazareth was listening. Oh my, how He was listening! God had never intended to call the whole world to be loyal or faithful to an earthly regime – an earthly king – an earthly nation. God had always been calling people *to himself* – all of them. Isaiah got a glimpse of it – the Lord high and lifted up. It changed everything. The man from Nazareth got it too – only a lot clearer. Now, because of Him, it is our turn.

PRAYER

Lord God, it is hard to get used to the idea that it is our fault that we do not know You better, or feel closer, or understand Your will and WAY more clearly. Sometimes You seem so vague and hypothetical ... compared to our kind of reality: making money, driving cars, eating food, getting sick, accomplishing things, seeking our various kinds of pleasure.

If we have eyes that do not see beyond such things, how are we expected to behold You? If we have ears that do not hear beyond the din of earthly celebrations, how are we to hear what comes on the wings of the Spirit? When all of our memories and experiences have been limited by the finite, how are we to perceive and trust the Infinite?

Yet even in this very moment, we know we are not saying it all – not telling it like it really is. For we dream dreams that make no earthly sense – feel longings that cannot be contained by what we touch and see. We think thoughts that come from some vast place beyond us. We even do deeds that mock the rules of finite space and time.

Even as we pray unto You, O God – knowing we neither see nor understand – often we know that we are heard and understood. We are like little children who understand more than they let on, yet dare not let on that they know – even to themselves.

Forgive us for pretending we do not sense Your presence. It is only because we are afraid – afraid that the soul within us is really there, and that the sleeping power within our souls might awaken. What if You need another prophet, and we forget to pretend that we are asleep? What then?!

We shudder to imagine – though You only smile and wait. Perhaps if we trusted You more, we would fear our own souls less. Thou who art the Lord of History: Lord of the Past ... Lord of the Future ... Lord of what is going on now – all of it – teach us how to TRUST YOU.

Whatever sorrow we each carry in our lives at this moment – whether it be for some hurt or broken friend, or for the sin of the whole vast world – we remember in this moment that it was Your sorrow before we ever felt it. And it will go on being Your sorrow even if we turn away from it. We know that. Teach us to trust it.

Whatever hope and joy we carry in our lives at this moment – whether it be for a little flower in our garden, or because we are truly awakening to Your presence and Your Kingdom – we remember in this moment that it came from You ... that You created all things ... that You made it all possible long before we ever felt or knew it. We know this is true – that there is no other source of life or love. Teach us to trust it.

We also know that the heart of conversion and the heart of vocation are the same thing – that one comes with the other ... that each leads to the other. Both are a special kind of reply, to a special kind of question. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?”

We want very much to trust You here also, Lord. But we have to get past the drama, past the malarkey, past the images of other lives and situations that really are not our own. We know You never pass up a chance to team up with a willing servant. Help us to trust You, so that we also may be sent to where You really want us to be, and that we may know the joy of doing what You really want us to do.

We consecrate ourselves anew, Lord, as we pray in Your name. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-36
Luke 22:19-20
I Corinthians 11:23-25

JESUS & JEREMIAH

I have been suggesting that we may understand Jesus better, see the depth of His purposes more clearly, if we connect Him to the heritage and history out of which He came. Far from reducing classic Christian conclusions about Jesus' identity, this highlights them. Far from watering down the uniqueness of Jesus and the startling new perspective He brought to the world, this heightens it.

If people read only the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, they see the vast spectrum of God's work and purpose among us in terms of a three-year time span. (Even though the Gospels themselves keep connecting Jesus to His heritage, it is possible to skip over that, or at least pay small attention to it.) Seeing Jesus all alone and coming out of nowhere, it is easy for some people to believe in Him quickly – building systems both rigid and coercive – out of fear or need. But it is also easy for others to disbelieve in Him just as quickly. Maybe the records were tampered with, or somebody overreacted, or a few people got carried away with their wishful thinking. Three years can be the turning point of all history, but taken out of the context of history, it seems to have no past or future – an accident or aberration, easily neglected or set aside.

The truth is that Jesus did not come out of nowhere. Getting into the Old Testament is not easy, but when people get there for long enough to see what is going on, it becomes increasingly clear that we cannot write off Jesus without writing off the two thousand years of incredible leaders and amazing events that inexorably lead up to His life. I am not saying it will “prove” anything to a person determined or predisposed not to see it. But once seen, everything shifts gears. The drama is about a God who really cares for us, and who always has and always will – enough even to finally reveal himself in Jesus Christ. And the drama is also about us – about all humankind. And yes, it is about the God who, in Christ Jesus, loves, redeems, and saves his children.

Anyway, we are looking at the heroes and role models who helped to shape Jesus' life and way of thinking – His values and methods and goals, and even His final purpose. Today we turn to Jeremiah. How can I tell you briefly about the bond between Jesus and Jeremiah? It is soon

obvious that Jesus could quote any of the prophets verbatim. But what about Jeremiah in particular?

What I am about to say is foolish, and you should not take it very seriously. We all have our own unfounded, unprovable bias. But sometimes we cannot shake it, or do not really want to. It is my own personal hunch that Jeremiah was Jesus' number-one human mentor. There is no reason to rank Jesus' heroes in order of importance, and in fact, it is silly. But I no longer care about that. If I were going to be in a debate on the subject and wanted to pick the most defensible position, I would probably pick Moses. If I were interested in hitting the heartstrings or pleasing the most discerning women, I would probably pick Second Isaiah. If you do not have an opinion, I hope it is not because you do not care. In any case, I think Jesus loved Jeremiah. If John the Baptist was the forerunner in Jesus' own time, nevertheless Jeremiah was His spiritual older brother. Please, I do not mean to minimize the impact of Isaiah or Moses or Abraham or the others. I just want to add the enormous influence of Jeremiah. He is right on the Ascendant.

What did Jesus learn from Jeremiah? It would take hours to discuss it well. But here are a few of the items: How to pray. How to hope. How to stand alone, when it is necessary. How to believe in God when everything is going wrong. How to care about people who are trying to hurt and kill you. How to fail in the world and still go on working for the Kingdom of Heaven – and never quit. How to face disaster without going negative. How to be faithful to God and not to men. I realize that our world does not think these are very interesting or important topics. We think math, physics, political science, and a whole host of other topics are far more relevant. But you could not be Jesus if you did not learn these things. And you had to learn them from somewhere. I am convinced that Jesus learned them from, trained in them with, and kept going back for refresher courses to ... Jeremiah.

A little context – much too little: During Isaiah's life and ministry, as we mentioned last week, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. The Southern Kingdom of Judah narrowly escaped, and Jerusalem itself was spared by a miracle. The Southern Kingdom began to recover in the lull that followed – as Assyria went into decline and was subsequently conquered by the Babylonian Empire (Nebuchadnezzar). Naturally, most Judeans did not see their own time in terms of a lull between Assyria and Babylon. They interpreted their deliverance as the special promise and favor of God, and took it as

a guarantee that they would prosper from now on and that God would bring back the Golden Age of King David. The destiny of the Chosen People was back on track. That was what the priests said. That was what the popular prophets said. That was what the king and most of the people believed ... except for Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, which matters to me because it places him in the line of famous priests back through Abiathar (David's priest), the great grandson of Phinehas, son of Eli, the old priest who raised Samuel. Anathoth, Jeremiah's home town, was two and a half miles northeast of Jerusalem, an hour's walk. Jeremiah came from a prominent, well-to-do, highly respected priestly family. He was a fine young man, well-educated, and engaged to a lovely young woman, his career already established and assured. And then the prayers came.

Jeremiah felt compelled, often against his will, to announce the coming destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. Though this was in line with the life and prophetic ministry of Isaiah a hundred years earlier, the people only remembered Isaiah's declaration that Jerusalem would be spared. So they mocked Jeremiah for not being like the great prophet Isaiah (terrible irony). Jeremiah was young. They insisted he didn't know what he was talking about. They accused him of being unpatriotic, of having no love for his country, of being a troublemaker, of being a traitor. Jeremiah's fiancée broke off their engagement – or, more likely, her family did. Jeremiah's own family turned against him. The entire priestly establishment rejected and dishonored him. The king and his court grew angrier and angrier. Remember that what I am saying in a few minutes, Jeremiah was living through for over forty years.

The accusations were terribly untrue, on top of which Jeremiah was an exceedingly sensitive and caring person who loved his country and his tradition with passion and devotion. It cut him to the heart that people so misunderstood and maligned him. Jeremiah became furious with God – accused God of every kind of deceit, malice, lying, and trickery. Jeremiah begged to be released from his vocation; begged God to stop talking to him; swore he would never preach another sermon as long as he lived; cursed the day on which he was born. In anguish and loneliness, Jeremiah poured out the anguish of his spiritual struggles on paper. We therefore know more about Jeremiah's inner life than that of any other prophet. Here is only one small sample:

O LORD, You have deceived me, and I was fool enough to listen to You. You are stronger than I am, and You have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" Your Word has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart, as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. Yet I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side! "Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" say all my familiar friends, watching for my fall. "Perhaps he will be deceived, then we can overcome him, and take our revenge on him."

But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O LORD of hosts, You who try the righteous, You who see the heart and the mind, let me see Your vengeance upon them, for to You have I committed my cause. Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers. [Jeremiah tries to crawl out of his dark mood, but cannot.] Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, "A son is born to you," making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities which the LORD overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb, so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb for ever great. Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and to spend my days in shame? (Jeremiah 20:7-18)

So they hated him, beat him, put him in the stocks, threw him in a cistern to die, threw him into jail, sentenced him to death – and the rest of the time they mocked and derided him, calling him a coward and a liar and a traitor and a false priest. He never married, never had a family. Toward the end of his life, Jeremiah watched his message coming true before his eyes. No man ever longed more to be wrong, but he was not. Babylon marched over Judah in a series of disasters – killing thousands, carrying thousands more into slavery, destroying Jerusalem, tearing down the walls, utterly destroying the temple Solomon had built. The Kingdom of David was no more. To this day, it is referred to as "The Babylonian Captivity." When Jonah was swallowed by the great fish, this is what was being referred to – Babylon swallowing up Judah. (*Jonah* means "dove" in Hebrew – the symbol of Judaism.)

One small incident: We mentioned that the prophets acted out their message. One day Jeremiah came walking into Jerusalem with an old wooden yoke across his shoulders, to symbolize that the yoke of Babylon would fall upon Jerusalem and its people. Hananiah, a leader of what Jeremiah called the false prophets, gathered a crowd, derided Jeremiah in the usual manner, and grabbed the yoke from his shoulders and broke it on the pavement, saying, “Thus will God break the yoke of all oppressors from off the shoulders of Judah.” The crowd loved it. Jeremiah did not say a word.

The next day, Jeremiah came plodding back into Jerusalem, this time with an iron yoke across his shoulders. “Break this one,” he said silently. Then he told Hananiah that for speaking in God’s name, without bothering to get God’s permission, Hananiah would die within the year. Would you like to know what happened? (Jeremiah 28)

With time so short today, and being able to read only one passage from Jeremiah’s prayer diary, I hope I have not left you with a misimpression. What I want you to see is Jeremiah’s utter honesty with God. He held nothing back. But for all Jeremiah’s anguish and complaining, God and Jeremiah were very close. God was, after all, his only friend. (Some think Baruch may have been also.) And Jeremiah, despite his threats and despair – despite all the pain and disaster – was God’s man all day every day for more than forty years.

By the way, as Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were being carted off to slavery in Babylon, there was only one voice of hope in all the land. Only Jeremiah knew that the story was not over. Picking up from his forerunner, Isaiah, he declared, “A remnant shall remain.” Jeremiah was saying to the exiles: Get faithful. Get back to God. Never give up hope. A new day will come. A better plan and WAY than any of us have ever seen or imagined is still our destiny.

Beyond all other things, Jesus learned two things from Jeremiah: a life of prayer, and the coming of a New Covenant. Let’s get to the heart of Jeremiah’s purpose and message: “*Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*” (Jeremiah 31:31)

Every major prophet after Jeremiah recognized this statement as the authentic Word and Promise of God. They picked it up, embellished it, and proclaimed it as the purpose of Yahweh. It was what God was

working toward – what God would do in the future: a New Covenant, a new arrangement with God, a new design and a new kind of Holy Nation. That was what was coming – what God was about. Each prophet in his own way and time struggled with the current events and trends going on around him. Each one tried to awaken the nation to its peril and to its purpose. Each one contributed to the survival of the Jewish people, and to the survival of the concepts that are Judaism. Indeed, it is hard to believe that Judaism *could* have survived, even though we have the story and know that it did. Nevertheless, the prophets did their work, prayed their prayers, and spoke the things they saw and were told – even when, from human understanding, there was no more hope and nothing left to build the dreams upon.

And always one theme emerged above the rest, and above even the most critical and crucial issues of their own day: a New Covenant, a new kind of Kingdom, a new kind of Leader ... was coming.

There were six hundred years between Jeremiah and Jesus. For six hundred years, the New Covenant had been talked about, proclaimed, dreamed about, and prayed for. Now the times felt desperate, and destruction seemed near and inevitable once again – this time at the hands of Rome. Is it hard to imagine Jesus as a young man, out under the sky – praying ... pondering the meaning of life ... wondering about the events of His own day ... thinking about the heroes of the past?

“The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah.” A New Covenant with Israel? Israel had been destroyed a hundred years before Jeremiah, back in the time of Isaiah. Why was Jeremiah still dreaming of the Northern Kingdom? Only a fragment of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, still remained. Why did Jesus so often befriend and lift up the Samaritans – the hated remnants of Israel? He knew from the great prophet that God still held them in the plan, no matter how the world saw them.

Yet six hundred years had passed since Jeremiah’s thunder had been silenced. Where was the God of Jeremiah? Where was the God of *any* of it? If there was a God, what was he waiting for? “Oh, but Jesus could never have had any doubts ...” Haven’t you heard people say that? How incredibly shallow. Nobody could have had the kind of faith Jesus had *unless* they had faced their doubts to the depths, and seen through and beyond them. Never run away from your doubts; it only makes them strong in the secret places. But do not forget to doubt your doubts.

So Jesus spent hours, as a young man, pondering and wondering: Was it possible Jeremiah had been wrong? Was it instead really all over? When would the story be picked up again, if ever? How would it happen? It had to happen in ways different from the ways that had already been tried – and had failed. And then one day, Jesus asked the questions once too often. “Oh no ... Wait a minute, Lord! I was just musing and wondering ...” But it was too late. The heavens opened – meaning, the plan and purpose came clear. The dove descended. There is one thing far scarier than being really confused – and that is being flooded with light.

A few incredible years later, there was no question about it. God was fulfilling the words of Jeremiah (that God had, of course, inspired). The theme was lifted up so clearly and so forcefully that no follower of Jesus could possibly miss it, or wonder what Jesus was doing, or mistake what His church must be about. *You* are called to remember it every time you take communion. You take it into your personal destiny and incorporate it into your spiritual pilgrimage every time you drink from the cup. It is the highest sacrament of Christendom.

“In the same way Jesus took the cup after supper, and said, ‘This cup, which is poured out for you, is the new covenant in my blood.’” (Luke 22:20) There can be no mistaking it. Jesus is calling forth the prophecy of Jeremiah.

“In the same way, he took the cup after supper and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death, until he come again.’” (I Corinthians 11:25)

The NEW COVENANT (the New Testament) is what Jesus had come for. His ministry had called it forth and called it to life, and His crucifixion had sealed it as an open invitation forever – an invitation to enter into the New Covenant with God.

What is “new” about the New Covenant? And is there other evidence that Jesus was following the description of Jeremiah as He gathered followers, shaped concepts, and patterned the life of the church? Yes, Jesus was consciously, intentionally, purposefully living out the prophecies – bringing the past promises to fruition – carrying forward the declared purpose of God.

First of all, the New Covenant is “not like the covenant I made with their forefathers.” (Hebrews 8:9) Many Christians jump to the conclusion that the Old Covenant was hard, rigid, and inhuman, while the New Covenant is soft, pleasant, and appealing. Are they really trying to understand, or do they just want to be sure that everybody thinks Christianity is better than Judaism? Why go along with Satan’s agenda? There should be no difference between Judaism and Christianity. Separation is sin! Jesus certainly never intended it. Paul clearly hated the rift.

Moses came off the mountain with some very stringent concepts and rules about how Israel should behave as the servant people of God. Jesus goes beyond the Old Covenant, making it an *internal* way of seeing life and living it. Jesus’ code, if anything, is more demanding than Moses’ was. But they do not fight each other. One seems to be based on concept and precept. The other is based on relationship and personal allegiance. You cannot follow Jesus’ WAY, or Jeremiah’s prophecy, unless the Holy Spirit is with you – talking inside your head. Jesus also makes it clear that the New Covenant is not a political nation, but a spiritual fellowship that is to spread through all the world. The New Covenant does not promise political or material prosperity or success. It does, however, promise persecution, as the new ideas and WAY of Life challenge the structures of the world. At any rate, it is to be a movement and a Kingdom *not of this world*. Many blessings are promised to those who enter the New Covenant relationship, but they are blessings of the inner life, of the spirit, and of another, higher realm.

The New Covenant is not based on obedience to written rules, but on obedience to a living Holy Spirit who communicates from within. Jeremiah had said, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” It will not be an outer code – it will be an inner relationship with God. This was Jeremiah, six hundred years before Jesus, describing a day when we would all receive the Holy Spirit, and this would be the core and center of our living. Certainly it is the core and center of Jesus’ life and ministry, with the culmination in Pentecost – the power that brings the church into being. But two thousand years after Jesus, most of Christendom has not grasped it yet. We still want to put our emphasis on ecclesiastical structures, creeds, denominational success, theological constructs, or feeding programs – help people, act like you love them, give them anything ... except Jesus and His Holy Spirit.

Some of you chide and tease me, saying, “All you ever tell us is to go pray.” Well, I don’t tell you to pray the way most people go at it, but you’re right! I think the real answer is in your personal relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – if you truly turn your will and your life over, and truly seek to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis. (Hourly is better, but we get lazy.) And of course, until you taste the wonder of the Holy Spirit’s presence, that sounds like too much work. We would rather find our solutions almost anywhere else. That, in itself, reveals our separation, our lack of trust, our alienation from God – SIN.

Some of you actually *try* to misunderstand. You like to pretend that I am saying there is no value in the world – that you should not try to make money, get educated, or be deeply involved in the institutions or structures of this world. You like to suggest that I do not want you to try to help other people, get messed up in politics, or become involved in social issues. Only, what I *really* tell you is that none of it will matter – none of it will come to anything you really care about – UNLESS ... unless you get involved in it because the Holy Spirit is guiding you, sending you, and going with you.

I do know, by the way, how to make this church a lot more program-oriented – a lot more exciting to many of the people in our time and culture. I know that parades and bandwagons draw people, and seem exciting, and even bring in a lot of money. And plenty of churches are proving it. I even suspect, after all these years, that if I put my mind to it, I could probably play the role of a saintly guru and persuade enough folk to come help for the good of the cause, and we could really make this place hum.

But I do not want you for me – or for this church. You are for the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. I do not want to see the look in your eye when we meet five hundred years from now and we both know we were just playing stupid earth-games when we *could* have been devoting our energies and our lives to the Lord of Love and Light. Jesus brings us a New Covenant: the presence of His Holy Spirit to be with us and to guide us. It is the pearl of great price. It is worth any sacrifice. If any success comes our way in this world, that is always fun, but it doesn’t mean anything. What matters is each one of us dying to our old ways and values – and coming into New Life in Christ Jesus.

Jeremiah lived one of the bleakest, loneliest lives imaginable – from a human perspective. But he was a man of such deep and profound prayer that he saw what God’s next step was going to be. And in that hope, he ran straight and true for forty years, though everything he loved and cared about crumbled around him. And his life was witness enough, and his message clear enough, that it was still waiting for Jesus to pick up, those many years later – a blueprint that led from carpenter to the Christ of God.

PRAYER

O Thou to whom all hearts are open, and from whom no secrets are hidden, we bring before You now even those things which we have tried to hide from ourselves. We bring You our fears: the fear of failure in which this world, our friends, and even we ourselves count ourselves as worthless; the fear of what others may think of us; the fear of pain and disease and death. May Your perfect love cast out our fears.

We bring unto You our needs: our need for friends; our need for food and shelter; our need to serve, to give, and to be appreciated. May we find the faith which is sufficient for all our needs.

We bring before You our desires: our desire for the happiness, fun, laughter, and beauty which make life rich within us; our desire for the truth by which we may walk and be lifted beyond ourselves. May we find our desires filled beyond our own imaginations in the coming of Your Kingdom within and around us.

As we bring before You these things which are part of us, we bring also ourselves. As we have prayed here together, so we would be bound together by Your great love, which cannot be destroyed. Grant us, we pray, some awareness and understanding of the fears and needs and desires of those who sit around us. Mold us together that we may be Your people.

Though it causes us to tremble, we ask to be made the bearers of the LIFE which is in Christ Jesus. We ask to become the people who have no peace, save the peace which comes from You. Through Christ Jesus our Lord, we pray. Amen.