

Jeremiah 31: 31-34  
Ezekiel 11: 19-20  
John 12: 20-36

Hearts of Stone and Seeds of Light  
March 22, 2015  
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Recently I was asked whether Lent was a depressing time. This led to a discussion of “giving things up for Lent,” a self-discipline of spiritual awareness. In the tradition of the Christian church, Lent is a “penitential” season. So we could imagine that penitence is always somber and depressing, and that giving something up is painful and gloomy. But there are other ways to look at these six weeks. It is a season of preparation: we get ready for Easter. So, you might say, whatever gets you truly ready for Easter, whatever you will need to really experience the resurrection story, is what you should be doing now. I imagine that there must be many ways of doing this. The scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Walter Brueggemann, says, “Lent is our season of honesty. It is a time when we may break out of our illusions to face the reality of our life in preparation for Easter, a radical new beginning.”

Today’s Scriptures give us some metaphors to help us think about honesty and new beginnings. The ancient Hebrews thought of the heart as the home, not only emotions, but of mental processes and will. It was the whole “inner” person, so to speak. So when the Psalmists or the prophets talk about the heart, they are thinking of all the things that go into our decision-making, our choices in how to live. It is the place where belief and action might become congruent.

I think about the phrase “learning something by heart” and it reminds me of a story I heard about a famous professor of preaching named Fred Craddock. He made a habit of intentionally memorizing Scripture or verses of hymns so that when in the middle of a sleepless night or while sitting in the hospital waiting room or when pulling up the driveway of a friend who had suddenly passed away, he could pull out those reminders and repeat them to himself and, when necessary, share them with others. Not written on little slips of paper he carried in his pockets, but written in his memory, written on his heart, so that it was part of his relationships with others.

Jeremiah had a vision of a new covenant with God. The older covenant had been the one made with Moses and his community in the desert of Sinai, symbolized by laws written on tablets of stone. The older covenant was a broken covenant: that life-giving Torah, an ethical system for social harmony and justice was celebrated in word but not lived in reality. The tablets of the covenant were boxed into the Ark of the covenant, then placed in the Holy of Holies in the Temple as a way of honoring the presence of God. It was an external system, easy to ignore, either as individuals or as a nation. In Jeremiah’s understanding, this produced disaster: social and political and military disaster. A radical new beginning was needed. The life-giving Torah needed to be inhaled or ingested, written, so to speak on the hearts and minds and wills of all the people. What was once in the sanctuary will now be placed in the internal human sanctuary, making it a holy place.

Ezekiel, writing a little after Jeremiah, speaks in a similar metaphor, but he suggests more drastic surgery. The hearts of the people had become hard and stony, fossilized in disobedience.

They needed new hearts, new spirits. God will give them this spiritual transplant as a way of bringing them back to life-giving law. Then the broken relationship, the broken covenant, will be mended.

These passages have often be read as prompts for the individual to clean up his or her act: to “get right with God” or to grow in private piety. After all, it says, “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Surely we can do this one by one, from the least to the greatest. But the Hebrew prophets rarely spoke of individual spiritual renewal. They saw people as naturally communal, as organic and connected human groups. Individual salvation meant nothing; the fate of God’s people was everything. The life-giving Torah was not a spur to narrow moralism. It was a realistic and urgent call for society to be just, free, and merciful. It was given at a time when a newly liberated, wandering people needed to name what freedom would look like. Jeremiah’s new covenant was given at another time when a newly liberated, homebound people need to find a radical new beginning. These concepts are too big for one person to have and keep alone – they must always extend through the community and beyond the community. Deep in the ethical heart of both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures is the conviction that God has liberated or saved or redeemed us and now we are given the task and joy of liberating and saving and redeeming others. In shorthand, we might say that what it means to have God’s word written in your heart, what it means to be faithful, is to liberate slaves.

I think of this, this month, as marches in Selma are commemorated and tempers in Ferguson continue to flare. I wonder, what is a comparable American version of external and internal laws, of written principles remaining just that, not acted upon, not written on the heart, not lived out with emotion and cognition and will? In this time “when we may break out of our illusions to face the reality of our life,” as Brueggemann puts it, what is our collective sin, our failed covenant? I think of the words carved beautifully over 200 years ago in the Declaration of Independence: “all men are created equal” and how long it took our nation to outlaw slavery. And when slavery was outlawed, perhaps beginning, just beginning, the process of recognizing our duplicity, we still maintained racism and segregation, stitched through the fabric of American life. And when we passed new laws, beginning, just beginning, the process of recognizing our failures in justice and mercy, racism remained and remains as part of the system. As long as we are living in denial and illusion, no matter what is written in declarations and laws, nothing new will happen. When we turn the lens of Lenten honesty on our world and our systems and ourselves, and see the failed covenant between our legal system and vulnerable people, then, and only then does a new future become possible. It becomes possible when we see clearly our systems and habits of privilege. It becomes possible when justice, equality and compassion are written on our hearts.

The prophets have some good news for us. God, in spite of our frequent inclinations to break covenant, comes to us in the words of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and offers us frequent new chances. God says, “Renew the covenant of liberation, have it written on your hearts, where it will motivate you rather than be imposed from the outside onto you.” Renew the covenant that names your freedom so that you can share that freedom with someone else. God is always calling us back to remember the basics of grace and justice. God is always calling us out of captivity in Egypt or Babylon – those systems and empires of greed and violent power - and hoping we will invite others to join us on the journey.

I don't want to minimize the challenges of this journey: it won't all be singing and dancing our way into the sunset. It requires shedding old baggage: things that will just weight us down. Old hates and fears, old prejudices and resentments: these might have to go: they are just too heavy. The journey requires some self-sacrifice – perhaps not in the sense of a physical death, but as a new understanding of what it means to be human. In the biblical thought-world, we are diminished by self-centeredness and expanded by self-offering.

Which leads us to the other useful metaphor in today's reading: the Gospel metaphor of the grain of wheat falling into the earth to die and to become fruitful. This is the paradox of human life and of nature itself: the shedding and transformation of the old life to produce new life. In the Gospel of John, we understand this to mean that the end of Jesus' life was not the end. It was a grain of wheat. It was a spark of light. It was hope and promise, and it bore much fruit.

It is the fifth Sunday in the season of Lent. Which metaphor, which mental picture, speaks to you and helps you prepare for Easter? What do you need to internalize what you have previously kept outside. What do you need to "give up"? What baggage do you need to shed? What injustice needs your voice to name it and change it? What seed will you plant?

Lent is our season of honesty. And, if we are honest, we know that we are often uncertain, afraid, undecided. We don't know how all this will turn out – or, we are afraid we do. But Lent is also a season of hope, a time of **un**realized promise. It is a season for courage. So I close with this:

Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote a story of visiting a garden in Japan. Her guide was explaining the symbolic significance of various trees, including bamboo, pine and the plum tree. The bamboo stands, said the guide, for long life, the pine for prosperity and the plum for courage. Lindbergh said that she could understand the bamboo and pine readily enough. "But why does the plum signify courage?" "Because," said her guide, "the plum puts forth its flowers while there is still snow on the ground."

May we have the courage to follow Jesus into a future of grace and possibility. Amen