



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**Love Engraved In Our Hearts**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Abel Lopez  
March 29, 2009

Good morning, as we come together this fifth Sunday of Lent, we are reminded that Lent is indeed winding down. Next Sunday we will gather here to celebrate Palm Sunday, the following week is Holy Week and Easter. Now would be a good time for us to reflect back on this Lenten season and ask if it is moving us forward-- toward an abundant, caring and grace filled relationship with God.

For so many, perhaps many of us, Lent has so often been full of negative energy. It has been a period of giving up, of supposedly putting ourselves in position to experience pain and suffering and thereby, somehow, becoming closer to God. It is true that the Lenten season starts with a call for each of us to ground ourselves again in the reality of our mortality that *we are dust and to dust we shall return*. It is also a call for us to take time out, to step back and examine sin in our lives and in the world. "Sin is real and it is what separates us from God."<sup>1</sup>

But during this season we are also called to fully open our hearts and minds to God's grace and love. We are reminded that in accepting Christ, we accept the work of Christ, the mission of Christ, to show God's love in the world, to bring abundant life to those whose lives we touch, and like Christ that we are willing to lay down our lives for others.

In the Old Testament lesson today we heard, from Jeremiah, that God would make a new covenant with his people. *"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."* *"... They shall all know me...for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."*

Walter Bruggeman asserts that the covenant construct requires that we think differently, "afresh" about the character and business of the church. He goes so far as to say... "The move God has made in heaven (putting his law within the people) opens up a new agenda! What is possible on earth? God's move to solidarity is a hint that solidarity on earth is possible."<sup>2</sup>

According to Brueggeman, there will be no community on earth as long as we rally around Old God claims of self-sufficiency and omnipotence. And the reason is that self-sufficient, omnipotent, isolated impassive people are incapable of being in community and embracing any solidarity.

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<sup>1</sup> Sermons that Works. Lent Selected Sermons. Wendy Dackson, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Covenant as a subversive paradigm by Walter Brueggeman.

The promise of a new community on earth is centered in the covenant's creation of a direct relationship between God and the people. No longer will it be necessary for there to be intermediaries between God and people.

Jeremiah, in his anguish, foretells of a time when all-- the strong, the weak, the educated, the unlearned, the powerful and those without power will have knowledge of God. And with that knowledge they are offered the opportunity to be in a personal, equal, inclusive, imperfect and sometimes messy relationship with God.

What powerful words these must have been for the people of Israel. Jeremiah's prophecy was at a time when the Babylonian empire had decimated ancient Israel. The people had lost their central place of worship, the Temple in Jerusalem. They were scattered and without the structure, order, rules and standards they had followed as a way of staying in contact with their God and which also held them together as a people. Jeremiah speaks of a covenant which changes the hearts of God's people. He speaks of one which is so intimate that it allows God's people to be one with God.

As Christians we see the new covenant, spoken of by Jeremiah, as the foreshadowing of Jesus himself. In this 'Covenant of Grace' God conveys itself to us and becomes ours. "Understand this! God--all that is meant by that word, eternity, infinity...immutable love--all that is meant by God--creator, guardian, preserver...all that that word "God" can mean, all of goodness and love, all of bounty and of grace--all that, this covenant gives you, to be your absolute property as much as anything you can call your own."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is the new covenant by which we recognize God as our Lord, and God recognizes us as God's people. As Christians we are defined by this relationship and given this identity at baptism. Jesus reframed the story of God and God's people; Jesus operationalized the promise that we could engage God through relationship rather than through religious rituals.

In our Gospel reading today we hear the story of Greeks that came to Phillip and said, "Sir we wish to see Jesus." "...we wish to see Jesus." Such simple and yet life changing words.

The very saintly Mother Teresa gave an interview during the last few years of her life. The reporter noted that religious orders in the west and many churches, for that matter, had been losing numbers. But the reporter also noted that Mother Teresa's order was growing by thousands, so she asked, "Why?" Mother Teresa answered without hesitation, "I give them Jesus." "Yes, I know, but what strategies do you develop? How do you manage it?" ask the reporter. "I give them Jesus" is the reply. "Yes, I know, but can you be more specific?" "I give them Jesus." Yes, we know of your fine work, but there must be something else," says the exasperated reporter. To this Mother Teresa replied, "I give them Jesus, There is nothing else."

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<sup>3</sup> C.H. Spurgeon

We're not entirely sure why these Greeks, these Gentiles, want to see Jesus. However, it is clear that Jesus' response to Philip and Andrew, also Greeks, is much more substantial and more detailed than what Philip or Andrew expected. It is not the response of the renowned lecturer meeting an overly motivated student, nor is it the response of a celebrity tired from the request of too many autographs. Jesus uses the question and this moment to comment about some of the more profound aspects of his ministry and his coming crucifixion.

He says if you want to see me then look at me. Look at me. Look squarely at this work, this mission, this call I have come to fulfill. It was an opportunity for them to see and understand what Jesus might mean in their lives. Although it can be a bit confusing, I believe that Jesus is telling us in this Gospel lesson what it means to see him.

First, Jesus says that the time has come for the Chosen One to be glorified. What Jesus means by this is that the time had come for the disciples and his followers to see the true nature of him. It was time for Jesus to show what he was about. Jesus was saying that his life was larger than his experience on earth. That it is a mistake to define our lives so tightly around our attachments, the desires and wants of this life. That when we see our lives as being connected not only to every other person and creature but also to infinity that we are then free to follow him.

I believe that Jesus was saying that his life and his work was all about this overwhelming, abundant, self offering, inclusive, passionate and compassionate love which makes the covenant relationship prophesized in Jeremiah possible.

Next week, many churches around the globe will link Jesus' ministry and crucifixion to atonement theology. Atonement theology includes the three ways the church speaks to the meaning of Jesus' death for us. One is the idea that Jesus has ransomed us by his death, that in his dying he frees us from sin. The second one is that Jesus is a substitute for us and that by his death he has taken on our sins. And, the third is that by Jesus' death God demonstrates to us how very much God loves us. Stephen L White of Princeton notes that John's gospel does not provide much evidence for any of these theologies.<sup>4</sup>

These sacrificial interpretations of Jesus' ministry and crucifixion seem to miss the very point of the new covenant. It is a covenant of pure unmingled grace.<sup>5</sup> In the new covenant God's promises us that God's love is available to each of us without condition. It is founded on simple mercy and grace. It moves toward us as a design of God. No sacrifice is required, no punishment is demanded, and there is no penalty to be paid.

All that is required is that we respond to God's invitation to be in relationship. I think that if we truly see Jesus, if we truly come to understand his mission, his call-- then we cannot help but respond. It is this response that fueled the growth in Mother Teresa's order. It is this response that causes this community of faith to stand for peace and justice in our community, this country and the world. Responding to God's magnanimous love for all

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<sup>4</sup> Life and Death and their Meaning, A sermon give at the Episcopal Church at Princeton University Chapel, April 2, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Stephen L. White

people means that we are in a triumphant grace filled relationship with God. It means that whatever happens, whatever comes our way we are transformed. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.

Jesus' death is cosmically powerful not because it is a sacrifice for human sin. Rather, the power of Jesus' death derives from the fact that it decisively demonstrates to the world that love is the very essence of what God is. His death is the ultimate manifestation of his relationship with God and with us. It suggests to us that reconciliation to God is through relationship with God and with those who God loves, the entire human family.

So as we come to the end of this Lenten season, my prayer for each of you and for this community is that we more than ever are able to see Jesus and that we respond to the power of his love engraved in our hearts, in our very being.

Amen