

# LENT 5

*Year B*

*The Rev. Phillip Lienau is a seminarian at Church Divinity School of the Pacific.*

## Jeremiah 31:31-34

<sup>31</sup>The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup>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, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

### **Commentary from Phillip Lienau**

Even though the book of Jeremiah is set amid times of extraordinary suffering for the people, including war and exile, a recurring image is one of intimate relationship between the people and God. It is a relationship of a household bound by a marriage bond – but a bond has been strained to the breaking point. In this passage, God proclaims a renewal of the relationship, yet the renewal is based on a new kind of covenant. God will write God’s law on the hearts of the people, and “all shall know [God].” This knowing in the heart, both individually and collectively, provides for the people a new kind of secure connection to God, in the wake of the destruction of the temple in the war with Babylon. Now the people can know God anywhere, under any circumstances, and know that God will keep the covenant and forgive. God’s action to instill knowledge directly in the hearts of the people can be empowering, especially for those who may not be recognized as possessing or deserving access to knowledge. Here we see that relationship with God will not be obstructed by human systems of hierarchy and power.

### **Discussion Questions**

How might Jeremiah’s imagery of intimacy with God in your heart affect how you pray?

How does God make Godself known in your heart, and how might that empower you to show that in the world?

## Psalm 51:1-13

- <sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; \*  
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
- <sup>2</sup> Wash me through and through from my wickedness\*  
and cleanse me from my sin.
- <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, \*  
and my sin is ever before me.
- <sup>4</sup> Against you only have I sinned \*  
and done what is evil in your sight.
- <sup>5</sup> And so you are justified when you speak \*  
and upright in your judgment.
- <sup>6</sup> Indeed, I have been wicked from my birth, \*  
a sinner from my mother's womb.
- <sup>7</sup> For behold, you look for truth deep within me, \*  
and will make me understand wisdom secretly.
- <sup>8</sup> Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; \*  
wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.
- <sup>9</sup> Make me hear of joy and gladness, \*  
that the body you have broken may rejoice.
- <sup>10</sup> Hide your face from my sins \*  
and blot out all my iniquities.
- <sup>11</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, \*  
and renew a right spirit within me.
- <sup>12</sup> Cast me not away from your presence \*  
and take not your holy Spirit from me.
- <sup>13</sup> Give me the joy of your saving help again \*  
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

### Commentary from Phillip Lienau

The psalmist prays to God for mercy in the context of offenses, wickedness, transgressions, and evil. Note that the prayer is not just for mercy, or even for a neutral relationship, but for joy. Joy is named twice, in verses 9 and 13. First, the psalmist prays to God to make them “hear of joy and gladness.” There is perhaps an initial distance, a request borne of humility, of intense self-reflection on how the psalmist has missed the mark. But later, it is as if the psalmist has grown in courage, based in faith in a loving and forgiving God, so that by verse 13, the prayer develops to a bold request: “Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.”

Whereas the psalmist begins with an honest acknowledgment of sin, not shying away from the harsh reality of the human condition, the counter-balancing reality of a God who shows “loving-kindness” breaks in, as light breaking into darkness. Note too that forgiveness here is not just offenses blotted out, but true transformation. This is not about a cosmic balance sheet; it is about renewed, loving relationship with God. The psalmist expects to be changed, as we hear in the prayer “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

### Discussion Questions

How have you experienced healing from sin in your life? If joy is integral to this healing, how might you look for healing amid joy, and joy amid healing?

The psalmist seems to grow in courage and faith. How has prayer helped you in your life to grow in your courage and faith in God?

## Hebrews 5:5-10

<sup>5</sup> So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you”;

<sup>6</sup> as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,  
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

<sup>7</sup> In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. <sup>8</sup> Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, <sup>9</sup> and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, <sup>10</sup> having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

### Commentary from Phillip Lienau

This passage links several important ideas for us: humility, prayer, obedience, and priesthood. Although priesthood is here ascribed specifically to Christ, we believe that in our baptism we are all called to the priesthood of all believers. This brings both privilege and responsibility. The privilege is secured for us by Christ, that just as he “was heard because of his reverent submission,” so may we be heard by God. But our commensurate responsibility is to recognize and live according to our proper relationship with God, which is one of loving humility and obedience. In other words, we may follow Jesus’ example in offering up “prayers and supplications,” even with “loud cries and tears,” but we must remember that our prayers are best offered with the reverent submission of that same example. Likewise, we may rightly rejoice in the privilege of participating in the priesthood of all believers, yet we are taught to follow Christ’s example by not glorifying ourselves. As we pray, the kingdom, the power, and the glory are God’s.

### Discussion Questions

What does (or could) “reverent submission” to God look like in your life?

In this passage, priesthood is bestowed by God. What privileges and responsibilities do you feel God has bestowed upon you?

## John 12:20-33

<sup>20</sup>Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup>They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” <sup>22</sup>Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

<sup>27</sup>“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” <sup>29</sup>The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” <sup>30</sup>Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup>Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup>And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” <sup>33</sup>He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

### Commentary from Phillip Lienau

Rhetorically speaking, in this passage we are presented with three different ways of considering the relationship between life and death. First, Jesus refers to what we might call the natural order of things in creation: all that lives dies, and life often comes from what has died, as in the example of the grain of wheat. In one sense, it is not up to the grain of wheat to live or die; both life and death, and then life from its death, are inherent in how it was created. Second, Jesus refers to the fact that we, so much more than a grain of wheat, have the blessing and burden of choice. The message is clear: while we cannot choose to live or die any more than the grain of wheat, we can choose the manner of our living. The better choice is to live in such a way that we are like the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and brings new life that “bears much fruit.” Third and lastly, Jesus refers to his own death, a death that is entirely his choice, but is in the context of a life lived to the glory of God. By bringing these three layers or levels of existence together (the grain of wheat, human beings, Christ), this passage at once reminds us that we are created and are utterly at the mercy of our creator, and that we are called to exercise our extraordinary gift of free will to choose how we live, to follow the example of Jesus in loving God and loving our neighbor.

### Discussion Questions

If you are like a grain of wheat, what or where is your patch of earth in which your faithful choices might bring forth new life? Where can you make a difference today?

Jesus says that he will “draw all people to [himself].” How does Jesus draw you?