

*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. 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. 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. 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.*

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If I say the words “Mt. Wachusett” it is probably safe to say that everyone here knows what I’m talking about. But it conjures up more than a place on a map: you might think of a hike on a crisp October day, or skiing down the mountain on a January night. Your first thought might even be of a country ale. The place conjures up all of that. There are two big ideas at the heart of Old Testament theology and each is symbolized by a different mountain: Mt. Sinai, located in the Sinai Desert and Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. Each place is important for our Lenten journey.

The Sinai tradition is focused on Moses and the Exodus and Israel’s forty-year journey through the wilderness. It’s about the move from slavery toward freedom. At the heart of that experience is the giving and receiving of Torah on Mt. Sinai. As Jill said a couple of weeks ago in her sermon, the Decalogue is given not as an abstract set of rules (“*you better obey or else...*”) but as instruction from a loving God about how to make a neighborhood. The psalmist says the gift of Torah is “sweeter than honey.”

One of the most important things we can learn from the Bible is that it is not all about *me* and God. It’s really about *us* and God. You cannot say you love God (whom you can’t see) if you don’t love the neighbor who sits two pews away from you on the opposite side of the Church—or two cubicles away from you at work—or two houses away on your street. When the theologians talk about *covenant* that’s what they are getting at: relationship that binds us and God together.

So Sinai is about setting some boundaries and creating a space where divine love and neighborly love are possible. As we’ve recited the Decalogue again and again over the past month, it’s important for us to remember that it isn’t only murder and stealing and adultery that can ruin the neighborhood. Gossip and envy and jealousy are just as dangerous, and far more prevalent. Keeping the Sabbath holy isn’t about not buying wine on Sundays; it’s about how if we are not careful” we become like chickens running around with our heads cut off—disconnected from both God and each other. We just haven’t got the time you know! We are too busy! The thing is that when you lose Sabbath you become more and more isolated and it becomes that much harder to find the time to love God and neighbor

The second major tradition in the Old Testament focuses on the promise of a *house* to King David: that promise culminates in Israel’s hope for a Messiah who will ultimately deliver them. The symbol of that hope is the temple in Jerusalem, a.k.a. Mount Zion. As Israel became more cosmopolitan and settled, the holy city became something like a combination of Washington, DC and the Vatican and Mecca all rolled into one. The temple on Mt. Zion becomes holy ground: the place where you meet God. We are only one short week away now from Palm Sunday when we’ll

have our little parade around the Church with our palms to remember Jesus entering into that holy city of Jerusalem amid shouts of “hosanna, Son of David.”

So these are the two great strands of Old Testament theology—Sinai and Zion—strands that shape the way we as Christians understand Jesus as a second Moses and a Son of David. But there is also a great watershed moment in the Old Testament where both Sinai and Zion are threatened. It comes in the time of the prophet Jeremiah, who lived almost six hundred years before Christ, who witnessed the unthinkable: the Babylonian army marching into Jerusalem and destroying the walls of the holy city, and then the city itself, and finally the temple.

Imagine how profound such a loss must have been as both political and religious leaders were carted off as refugees to a far off land. There by the waters of Babylon, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, they put up their harps and wept, for how could they sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? How would we be able to sing “The Church’s One Foundation” or “Lift High the Cross” or “Stand up Friends” if such a thing happened to us?

At first no one wants to believe that the unthinkable can happen; and then the unthinkable does happen. We know from our own experience that when planes fly into buildings in lower Manhattan (or on a more personal level when we hear the doctor say the word “cancer” or a marriage comes apart or we lose our job or a congregation closes)—all of these things can cause a crisis of faith. Elizabeth Kubler Ross has reminded us that the experience of grief is an emotional roller-coaster that includes denial and bargaining and anger and depression before one can ever make it close to acceptance. It can take a while. Theologically when we go through such an experience we cannot help but to ask, “where is God?” *Why has God allowed this to happen?*

So when we talk about the Babylonian Exile that is shorthand for what we are talking about. For the people of Israel it felt like the God who had been revealed to Moses at Mt. Sinai and the God who promised a lineage to David at Mt. Zion had gone M.I.A. When that happens the “traditions” are of little help. The old triumphant hymns just don’t ring true. People begin to feel abandoned and lost and frightened.

It is the hard and difficult task of prophets like Jeremiah to speak a Word of the Lord into just such a context, both in the years leading up to the exile and then into the decades of pain and grief that follow. Mt. Sinai was a distant memory and Mt. Zion was in ruins. Where is the God who defeated Egypt and hurled Pharaoh’s chariots into the Red Sea? And why isn’t God doing the same thing to the Babylonians? When you find yourself in the midst of that kind of crisis, when the outward and visible signs of your faith have been stripped away, that is always the question. We know that God is bigger than our metaphors and symbols and buildings; and yet when those things are stripped away it is still very sad and very scary and very isolating.

We assume the world as it is, the world *as we know it*, will always be there. We assume at least a basic level of security and predictability. Most of us know we have to deal with change in this world whether we like it or not. But we prefer our change to be measured out in teaspoons so we can manage it better; it’s unsettling when things change too fast. We who are wearied by the chances and chances of this life yearn to hold fast to something unchangeable. So what do we do when the bottom falls out from underneath us; when the unthinkable happens and we find ourselves in vertigo, and the very foundations of our faith begin to shake and even crumble?

It is precisely into that fearful place that Jeremiah dares to utter a Word of the Lord, offering this extraordinary word of hope that we heard today. It is not an immediate fix: he doesn't say, "don't worry, it was all a bad dream and you can wake up now." He doesn't say that we'll have Superman spin the world backwards so we can go back in time and get a do-over. He doesn't say if you just close your eyes and click your heels together and say "there's no place like home" Auntie Em and Uncle Henry will be right there to hold you.

The only way forward and out of despair is to discover hope. And by hope I do not mean denial or wishful thinking. Jeremiah says, "*the days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and of Judah.*" That new covenant will be written not on tablets of stone but on the human heart. But for that to happen, the community will need to figure out how to appropriate and embody the traditions of Sinai and Zion in new ways—even as they work through their grief and loss.

Actually one of the great gifts of the Babylonian exile is that before it is even written on the people's hearts it will need to be written out on scrolls. What we call Scripture—Moses and the prophets and those stories about King David and the psalms were apparently written down by scribes during the exile. Before that they were basically still "oral tradition." So this crisis of faith—the loss of Sinai and Zion—actually leads to the formation of what we call the Bible, or more specifically of the Old Testament. And it is our claim as Christians that these Scriptures are given to us for our learning: to read and mark and learn and inwardly digest them until they are indeed written on our hearts and lived out in our lives.

I don't believe God is the cause of human suffering in order to bring about a new thing. But I do believe that in and through suffering and pain and loss that none of us will fully escape in our lives, God is always in the business of bringing good from ill, of changing water into wine—and ultimately of bringing life from death. Easter is our Lenten destination; it defines who we are as Christians.

Times like these we are living in are difficult and one can be forgiven some bitterness or nostalgia. But we gather here to remember that God's best days lie ahead—not in the past. We gather here to rekindle hope and then to live toward the dream of God, one day at a time. For the days are surely coming... We gather here to learn to sing new songs—songs that can only be sung by people who have faced pain and struggle and come out on the other side.

*The days are surely coming...* In just a few minutes we break the bread and share the cup. For us not only Sinai and Zion but also the exilic times of loss in our own lives all culminate on a cross outside of Jerusalem. We gather to remember and to be re-membered as Christ's own and to proclaim that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. That is the journey we are on: from Good Friday through Easter morning and toward the New Jerusalem. Even at the grave we dare to make our song...*The days are surely coming...and I will be their God, and they will be my people.*