

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Lent 5 – March 29th, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Dear Followers of our Lord and Savior,

Have you ever felt like it's time for something New? You know, like it's time to mix things up, get people's attention -- really get things going here? Maybe you're sitting out there thinking that this seems like the same-old same-old. You might be thinking that if this church tried something new, we just might breathe some life into this 160 year old congregation. Well, I couldn't agree more. I've been waiting a long time to preach a sermon like this. All I needed was the right text to come along. And here it is.

So what's the next new, big thing? Forgiveness. What? You think that sounds like the same old thing? Then you plainly don't understand the difference between new and old. That's what God is teaching us this morning. And if you think that the lesson is wrong -- that forgiveness is not something new, that it's not the shake-up this congregation and more importantly each of us as sinners needs to get it moving, then you can take that up with the teacher, who is God himself. So our theme will revolve around that concept of something new:

Theme: May We Treasure Our New and Better Covenant

- 1. Better, because it will not fail**
- 2. Better, because it is written in our hearts**
- 3. Better, because it offers full and free forgiveness**

God has more than adequately proven the ineffectiveness of the old way, the non-forgiveness way. He said, **“The time is coming... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them.”** You remember that covenant, right? It was covenant given to the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai by Moses. It had a lot of laws: what they could and couldn't eat, what they could and couldn't drink, what they had to do and what they couldn't do. It had so many laws that nobody could keep them all. That is the old way.

What's the new way? **“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.’** What's new? Well, the old covenant was something that the LORD put before the people for them to obey or reject. It went like this: **“When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, ‘Everything the LORD has said we will do.’” (Exodus 24:3)** That's the old way. God tells the people what he wants of them, and they say, “We will obey.” Well, what's wrong with that? It seems like such a simple way of doing things! “Okay, God. Bottom line: What do I need to do? You just let me know, and I'll do it.”

You want to know what the problem is? **“...they broke my covenant, though I was a father to them.”** The old covenant was breakable, and the people broke it. They disobeyed. Of course they disobeyed! Rules were made to be broken, right? Everyone slips up now and then! You’re not getting it. God’s rules *aren’t* made to be broken. See the problem with the old way now? God is just. He protects the innocent and punishes the guilty. But when absolutely everyone is guilty, when absolutely everyone has broken the law and hurt people, when they have all offended God—then what? Then the old ways, the old covenant, is only good for one thing: condemning people. Then it is time for something new.

As the pastor of this flock, I want you to understand the problem with this old way of doing things. As your Pastor who is called to watch over and strengthen your spiritual lives, I’m always concerned about our congregation and the people in this congregation. And it’s not just because it’s my job. I love my brothers and sisters here. I love all of you. And because I love you all, because I love this congregation, I want to do what’s best for everyone.

One of things a Pastor does is read lots of things. Boy, I want to tell you that there are lots of different ideas out there. One of the new fads is trying new things and ways to make Churches and people grow in their faith and thus churches to grow in their size. These ideas have become quite popular, because who isn’t looking for a bigger church or a stronger faith. And most of the new things I read about are popular because they come from congregations that are growing. I think, “Huh. It would be great for St. Luke’s church to keep growing. Maybe they have something new I should listen to.” But you know what? Most of the time, the ideas I hear aren’t new. They’re old. They’re this same old covenant that didn’t work—laws put before people that they must agree to obey.

One of the authors of these types of books is named Rick Warren. He is the one who has written many books entitled, “The Purpose Driven ...” and you insert the word. People treat Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Church* like it’s hot stuff, but it’s the same-old same-old. The heart of it is making covenants: membership covenants, maturity covenants, leadership covenants. The problem is that when we make covenants or promises they are many times broken, especially when it comes to our spiritual well-being. Yeah, all too often people who read these books are led to try and do things to make God and yourself happy by being good, rather than looking to God for forgiveness. They make the keeping of God’s law the motivation, rather than being motivated by God’s great love for us. They can’t tell legalism from grace. At that point it is very definitely time for something new.

All right, so what’s that new thing again? **“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”** This is the solemn declaration of the LORD. Here’s the new thing: Instead of putting the law before people and asking them if they will agree to obey it, the LORD proposes something new. He proposes a love that becomes ours through faith as the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts. This is not a covenant people agree to. It is an action of God. It doesn’t ask for participation. It creates whole new people out of the old.

And just how does the LORD propose to insert his law or teaching into our hearts? The final sentence of our text lays out his plan: **“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”** Well, how is that supposed to help? Forgiving them just seems to be letting them off the hook! They’ll run all over God! That sounds like the same old problem we’ve always had, with people not respecting God like they should and treating the church like it’s nothing! No. You don’t understand. The holy God we were talking about before, the same God who could not stand to see any of his rules broken, *he* will forgive wickedness and forget sins. Don’t you get it? This is the new thing: The holy God will forgive sinners. He will call sinners his people — and he himself will pay for their sins. That’s his plan. That’s his new thing. I’ll demonstrate it right now. All I have to do is say, “You’ve done plenty enough to deserve God’s wrath, but your sentence in hell has already been served. You are free to go. True, you have committed crimes that God considers worthy of eternal damnation, but no charge will stick to you in the divine court of law, because God himself has served your sentence in the person of Jesus. Therefore you are innocent of every sin you have ever committed. Enjoy eternal life!”

Now, you may say, “That’s not new, Pastor! We’ve proclaimed that message before and we still have all kinds of problems in our church. I thought you said it was time for something new, something different. How can we keep doing the same old thing and expect a different result?” Brothers and sisters in Christ, you must understand: there are only two ways of doing things with God, two kinds of covenants. There is the covenant in which we trust our own ability to keep our promises to him, and there is the new covenant, in which we simply trust in his ability to keep his promises to save us. That’s it. Two options.

The fact is that when the way of forgiveness seems old and worn out to us, we have committed a horrible sin: lack of trust in God. You know what that does, don’t you? It’s forgetting about the God who loved us more than anything. Remember, this is God’s plan, not mine. He’s the one that said it was time for something new. He’s the one who said that the old way of putting laws in front of people and asking them to obey doesn’t work. He’s the one who says that forgiveness is the new way, the better way. Are you going to tell him that it doesn’t work as well as he says and that we need some good, old fashion covenants again?

How dare you! How dare you make so little of his forgiveness! How dare you correct the Almighty God in his own court, you little mortal! There is only one sentence for such a sin! And Jesus suffered it for you. Those lonely, dark hours on the cross were your sentence, your eternity—yours and mine and every one of the billions and billions of sinners who have ever lived. Do you know what the Old Testament word for *law* really means? It isn’t so much “rule” as it is “instruction.” That’s why no one has to say, “**Know the LORD**” in the new way of things. His self-sacrifice gives us a living knowledge of God that no covenant can, while at the same time giving us all the righteousness he requires.

So, if you know forgiveness in Christ, you truly know the LORD. If you know the sacrifice of Jesus, you know God’s love. And you are perfectly righteous to God, for Jesus’ sake. As Paul clearly tells us, “**Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!**” (Romans 11:33). I want nothing more for you and the many people of St. Luke’s than that you all rejoice in the ever-new gift that is already yours, so that you don’t go searching for something new or better in the old ways of law covenants. It is, indeed, time for something new, but that new thing is his forgiveness, which is new to you as his children each and every morning. All praise to him!
Amen.