

Maundy Thursday
April 17, 2025
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
The New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (EHV)

Yes, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, although I was a husband to them, declares the Lord.

³³But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds, and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴No longer will each one teach his neighbor, or each one teach 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 guilt, and I will remember their sins no more.

Dear Friends in Christ,

A covenant is an agreement between two or more parties. When two people sit down together to make an agreement, each person usually has some input. Each person gets to decide whether to agree to the covenant. Perhaps it is a job interview. The employer offers a job with a salary and benefits package and expectations for what and how much work is going to be accomplished by the employee. The employee may negotiate the hours or pay and if both parties agree, a covenant is signed.

The covenants God makes with people in the Bible are a little different. God sets the terms for the covenants. We don't get to negotiate with God to adjust the terms of the covenant. For some covenants with God, the people get to agree to the covenant but for others we don't even have that ability.

Think back to the first man and woman. The Lord God did not consult them before he created the universe including them. God did not consult them when making a beautiful garden for them to live in. He did not consult them when giving them dominion over all the creatures. Adam did get to name some of them but that was the extent of his input. God gave Adam and Eve everything good and perfect, only restricting them from eating what would kill them. That was the covenant. God gives everything good, and the humans are to refrain from eating one type of fruit from one tree.

Jump ahead in time to the days of Moses. The Lord God rescues his people from Egypt. He brings them safely through the Red Sea. He provides manna and quail and water in the wilderness. God provides everything good for his people and then he gives them the law. He gives them the Ten Commandments, laws governing their worship and laws for civil society. The people don't negotiate with the Lord who saved them from Egypt. Instead, they agreed to obey all the commands the Lord gave them.

We would consider the covenant in Eden and the covenant at Mt. Sinai to be part of the old covenant that Jeremiah refers to in the First Reading from God's Word for today.

Yes, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, although I was a husband to them, declares the Lord.

One way to define the old covenant is that the old covenant is able to be broken by humans. God's part of the old covenant is perfect. He rescues, promises, provides and commands perfectly. The recipients of the old covenant benefit from the old covenant until they break it. Adam and Eve lost everything when they ate from the forbidden tree in the middle of the garden. They lost their perfect relationship with the Lord. They lost their immortality. They lost their home when God forced them to leave Eden.

The same is true for the people of Israel. God's covenant with them at Sinai protected the people from false gods and kept the people from turning away from the only God who saves until they broke it. The Lord led them by the hand out of Egypt and soon the people yanked their hand out of God's so they could do their own thing. They refused to hold to God's covenant so they could be like the people around them. Although they had all agreed to the covenant when God thundered from Mt. Sinai, they quickly rebelled against the old covenant.

The old covenant is good because God made it, but we who are born in sin are not able to keep our end of the old covenant. Too often we are like a child who refuses to hold onto our parent's hand because "I can do it myself." But we can't. Whenever we go our own way, we depart from the commands of God. We break his commands every day. And just like the Israelites in the wilderness and our first parents, we would lose everything if the old covenant was God's only covenant.

Our gracious Lord made a new covenant with Adam and Eve immediately after they broke the old. God promised to send the offspring of the woman to crush the serpent's head. God would destroy the enemy for his people. Notice that this covenant promise has no second part. There is no command for Adam and Eve to keep. It is a one-sided covenant of grace. God promised that he will do something, and no conditions are attached.

Jeremiah reminds his people and us of the new covenant that God makes with his people in these beautiful words:

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds, and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴No longer will each one teach his neighbor, or each one teach 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 guilt, and I will remember their sins no more.

I will make...I will put...I will write...I will be...I will forgive...I will remember their sins no more. The Lord is doing everything. He makes the new covenant, and he keeps the new covenant. Sinful humans are not asked for our input, our obedience, or even our agreement. The new covenant is a one-sided covenant of grace. The Lord makes the covenant, and he alone keeps the covenant. We can't stop it, change it or break it. The new covenant does not depend on us at all.

Our gracious God arranged everything and sent his Son into the world, born of the virgin Mary in Bethlehem. No human made this happen. No human deserved to have the Son of God become one of us to save us. God alone kept his new covenant to send the offspring of the woman to rescue sinners. Jesus Christ lived perfectly under the old covenant. He agreed to live under the law. He kept every law of God in our place. His never let go of his Father's commands to go his own way. You see, God did not discard the old covenant he made with people. Instead, God's Son kept the old covenant for all who broke it. Not even the devil's temptations could stop Jesus from keeping the old covenant in our place.

Christ then gave his life to forgive all who have broken the old covenant. His holy, precious blood pays the full price for the sin of the world. The Lord's promise to forgive guilt and remember our sins no more is accomplished by the willing sacrifice of God's Son upon the cross. We didn't deserve this, earn this, or even ask for this. God promised forgiveness and delivered on his promise through Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Tomorrow, we will meditate more on the sacrifice Christ made on Good Friday. The night before he died, Jesus reminded his disciples of the new covenant and provided a wonderful and continuing way for believers to receive the promises of the new covenant. Luke records it with these words:

He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰In the same way, he took the cup after the supper, saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is being poured out for you. (Lk 22:19-20)

The blood of Christ secured the forgiveness of all sin upon the cross. The same blood of Christ is poured out for the forgiveness of sins in Holy Communion. The new covenant was delivered for you on Good Friday and is delivered to you whenever you eat the bread that is Christ's body and drink the wine that is Christ's blood. We did nothing to deserve this sacramental gift. We did not ask for another way for the covenant of forgiveness to be delivered to repentant sinners. We simply receive and believe what our Lord promises. The bread is his body. The wine is his blood. Therefore, we eat and drink with believing hearts and receive what God promised in his new covenant – the forgiveness of sins.

Amen.