

October 17, 2010

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

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.

KNOW BY HEART

When the miners in Chile were first trapped in the cave-in, I am sure that they were relieved to find themselves still alive. But that relief must have quickly turned into worry and anxiety when they realized that rescuers would have to tunnel through 2,000 feet of rock to reach them. For the first 17 days they sat in darkness. Would anyone be able to find them? What would they eat and drink? How long would there be enough oxygen? How would they manage, 33 men in a very small space, for days and weeks and months?

Away from fresh air and food and water and sunlight, you might say that they were in exile, unable to return home to the world that the rest of us know, where we can breathe fresh air and eat good food and enjoy the sunshine and all of other things that thrive in the world above the ground.

2,000 feet underground, all they could do for those first 17 days was wait in the darkness of their exile, and hope that somehow someone would be able to reach them. But how long would hope last?

Away from family and home, would loneliness and fear defeat them? Did anyone know they were still alive and would someone come to find them? Or would people walk away and leave them for dead?

Sometimes we feel that way, too. Not underground, but
in exile,

far from the place where we are known and loved. In those times, we can't hear God's voice. Praying seems useless. We are alone and lonely in our dark night of the soul. Does anyone know where we are, or who we are? Does anyone know that we are suffering, in need, praying to be brought back to a life full of light and love and the fresh air of hope?

Sometimes we sit in the darkness of exile, hoping that someone will somehow be able to recognize that we are here, we need help, we want our lives to change for the better. We want to come home from the exile of feeling separated from God.

All of us, at times, have felt like we are alone with our suffering, that no one understands us, that no one loves us. Sometimes it seems like even God does not know about our struggles. We pray and pray, we shout and cry, and there is no relief, no answer to our prayers.

It feels like no one understands, maybe not even God, and left alone in our exile of sadness and pain, we sometimes find it hard to even pray any more. Misery piles up and up until we feel like there are 2,000 feet of rock on top of us.

We are crushed by the weight of our suffering, and the hope and joy and peace are crushed right out of us.

In our scripture reading this morning we hear the words of the prophet Jeremiah.

“The days are surely coming,” Jeremiah begins, “when I will make a new covenant with my people. It will be different from the old one that the people broke.

It won't be written on stone tablets, but on the hearts of the people. No one will have to learn it because they will already know it by heart.

No one will have to ask, “Do you know the Lord?” All of the people will know me, every single one of them, because I will forgive them and remember their sin no more.”

Jeremiah was writing when the Hebrew people were in exile in Babylon, away from everything they knew and loved, with the Temple destroyed and their homeland in ruins.

They sat down by the river and wept, thinking about their home far away, wondering if God would ever rescue them from this place that might as well have been under 2000 feet of rock, dark and dusty, because they were in the darkness of exile, breathing the dust of despair and hopelessness.

Jeremiah's first words are intended to restore that hope. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord"---the days are surely coming when things will get better, when God will speak to us and be with us. Don't give up hope, because God is telling us about a future filled with hope!

The paragraph that we heard this morning is the second of three times in Chapter 31 that Jeremiah spoke the words, “The days are surely coming.” The first time God says that the destruction of Israel and Judah is finished, that the time is coming for building and planting.

The third time God says that the days are surely coming, it’s to tell the people that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and become sacred once again.

So we have the end of destruction and the beginning of rebuilding bracketing this morning’s passage, which is the high point of this chapter.

This time when God speaks and says, “the days are surely coming,” we hear that there will be a new covenant, that the people will know God in a very real and personal way, a covenant deeper than the covenant that they kept breaking and breaking, in spite of God’s faithfulness to them.

This time, they would know deep in their heart of hearts that they had been forgiven by God. This time, they would not misunderstand or have any kind of wrong idea about what the covenant with God is. This time, it would be deeper.

This time, it would be more than words on a tablet that someone else heard from God.

This time, it would be written in their hearts. The relationship with God would go to the core of each person's being. The people would know God by heart.

Knowing God by heart is what kept them faithful in exile. Hearing that the days were surely coming when God would write the covenant in their hearts and they would know God, every single one of them, from the greatest to the least of them---hearing this gave them great hope in their place of exile in Babylon.

God had not forgotten them or sent them out from his sight to disappear forever. God would be with them in their exile, and God would rebuild Jerusalem and bring them back again to their homeland.

They had a future with hope.

Deep underground, in the darkness, the miners found a way to hope for the future as well. From all accounts they quickly organized themselves, putting one man in charge of rationing the food, another in charge of hygiene, and others in charge of taking care of other needs.

One man, Jose Henriquez, was in charge of leading prayers. In exile, away from the places where they usually worshipped, they found that they needed to pray and to remember that God could and would still listen to their prayers. Just like the exiles that Jeremiah was speaking to, the miners needed to find a way to pray and to sing God's songs of hope in a strange land.

The miners prayed in the darkness for 16 days. On the 17th day, the rescuers broke through, making a hole big enough to allow fresh air to come in, to send down food and water, and to pass messages back and forth between the miners and their families.

53 days after the rescuers first reached them, the 33 miners were all pulled up through a hole just big enough to lower a cage and bring them up one by one.

69 days after their ordeal had begun, they are all out of their underground exile, restored to their families, back in the light of the world aboveground.

Underground, they had used what they knew by heart---what they knew about what it takes to survive, what it takes to function as a community,

What they knew about God! They used what they knew by heart to be able to come out smiling and healthier than anyone expected, and they were able to keep hope alive for 69 days!

What did they know by heart? They knew how to pray, to sing, to care for one another. They knew to trust in God.

And what is it that we know by heart, when we are in the exile of suffering, whatever that suffering might be, whether it's loneliness or grief or illness or injustice or poverty?

When hope is a fragile thing, when we sit in darkness, when we cry out and hear no answer, what is it that we know by heart?

God has written the covenant on our hearts. We know God by heart, every single one of us, from the greatest to the least!

We know how to pray. We know how to sing. We know how to depend on God for all that we need.

We know how to say "Help me, help me, help me!" and we know how to say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

We know how to wait and trust in God. We know how to love God and neighbor.

All of this and more, we know by heart. We know it by heart because that is the covenant that God has made with us, and God is faithful to that covenant, even when we are not.

Even when we are in exile and it seems like we are forgotten, God has not forgotten us. When it seems that we are alone in times that are hopeless, God is still faithful to the covenant that is written on our hearts.

It's just that sometimes we don't listen very well to our hearts. We prefer to be rational and scientific and logical. Our hearts are not often that way. Our hearts are more often relational, intuitive, and impetuous.

Our hearts know things that our minds do not. Our hearts believe God is with us even when there is no reason to believe that. Our hearts tell us to keep on praying when there is no answer for 16 days or even 16 years!

When our egos tell us that it won't matter if we act like we are not God's children just this once, our hearts tell us to remain faithful!

When our broken psyches tell us that there is no way that God can possibly forgive us after what we have done, our hearts know that we are forgiven!

When everything around us tells us that we are no one special, that we are not worth loving, our hearts tell us that we are God's beloved children.

God tells us, through Jeremiah, that we should listen to our hearts, because our hearts know God! "The days are surely coming," says the Lord!

The days have surely come!

One of the miners, 27-year-old Daniel Herrera Campos, was greeted by his mother Alicia with hugs and kisses after he came up out of the mine. Like many of the families of the miners, she was nearly overcome with emotion!

She reacted with her heart, and what she knew by heart was that she was filled with gratitude to see her son alive and well. Later, she announced that the first thing she would do once he was cleared by the doctors would be to take him home to southern Chile and go to church to give thanks to God for his safety!

God's grace and mercy was with Alicia and Daniel. God's grace and mercy are always with them, and with us. This is what all of us know by heart.

Listen to your heart!

Amen!