

March 29, 2009

St. Michael and All Angels

Lent 5b

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.

The days are surely coming. Those days will surely come.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord. But there's always dark before the dawn. Winter before springtime. Pain before a child is born. And we all know, if we've paid attention to the stories of Jesus that death necessarily comes before resurrection.

It's been a long and cruel exile. We've been waiting for eons; we've been waiting for minutes. Whatever it's been, God's sense of timing is, not always convenient.

Stuck in the heart of Babylonian captivity, far away from the comforts of home. Israel's remnant, doing the best she can, home-making, in what seems to be god-forsaken oppressive and self-absorbed city. And where, oh where is the comfort? How long must they wait for deliverance? How long must they sing their sad and desperate songs of lament? Where is God now? Who will take them by the hand? Who will return them home?

Homecoming is a hard won battle when everything's under siege. It's a long and winding road to wholeness. It requires dirt under the fingernails, and a whole lotta grace. The days may surely be coming, but they're not yet here. And those poor exiled Israelites must have been wondering, what would come of all this suffering? A lion's den? A rugged cross? Death like a grain of wheat in the soil?

This world's a mess, and yet God expects us to continue waiting it out?

Has nobody else seen the economy crashing down around us? Has nobody else noticed how many people are losing their jobs and their homes? Has nobody else seen the way this whole mess is tearing at our friends and family, the way it's eroding the once firm banks of society?

Where has this prophet been? Has Jeremiah's head been buried in the sand for that long? Has he not seen the troubled waters of New Orleans Louisiana, or the rising rivers in Winnipeg, Manitoba? The waves are coming at us, sandbags piling up everywhere, and even still:

The Red River is rising.
New Orleans is sinking, man,

And I don't want to swim

Who knows how long the levees we've built ourselves can hold. How long our pride will hold the inevitable at bay? Our stories of eternal progress, of self-sufficiency, of a church that has things figured out. How long will such notions keep us afloat?

And in the midst of this, we're just supposed to wait? Well...yes and no. There is one very real sense in which the covenant is already here. And yet, as we walk through lent, and through the particularity of this passage, we must focus upon the words contained therein.

Sometimes a sermon should leave things unresolved. Sometimes things remain unresolved, at least for a time. Easter may be coming, but it's not here quite yet...

In the midst of our modern exile, where is the government? Where are the insurance companies? Where are the pensions financial planners now?; Where are the individuals and organizations to lend us a helping hand? Where are the Christians to carry Jesus' cross?

The lower ninth devastated, and we're open for tourists.
The twin towers fallen, and we go out to shop.
The poor on our streets are going hungry
With politicians working lines doling out second-rate slop

This is the story of the Exodus. This is the story of our lives. If we were to listen, if we opened our eyes, maybe then we'd realise that we've been here more than once before. Maybe then we'd realise that we could just as easily end up here again.

I don't know how much you *can* remember. In fact, some days it's so far in the recesses of my most distant memories that I can barely grasp it either. But there was a time, another time, a story of another exile, the story of another rising tide of transformation and change. Another time our people had to wade through similar waters.

Once upon a time, our mothers, our fathers were enslaved in Egypt. Do you remember the covenant, the Exodus, the crashing Red Sea? Do you remember Moses, and Pharaoh, and the escape? Do you remember God's faithfulness? Pharaoh's army drowned? Do you remember how God troubled those waters too?

Even then, with that story so close at hand, with that lived experience of God's great faithfulness, our mothers, our fathers clamoured after and worshipped a golden calf. How quickly they forgot. How quickly we forget...

And here we are today. If you think about it, the trouble we're in, isn't only a trouble of politics. The trouble we're in isn't just economics gone awry. The trouble this whole world is in is that same trouble of our mothers and fathers. The trouble we're in is that same golden calf idolatry.

We've not loved God with our whole hearts. We've not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We've put anything and everything between us and the God who calls us to radical gratitude, radical welcome, and radical fidelity, one to another. Money, sex, greed and power. It's all there, and it's the wedge

driven between us. It keeps us apart. It keeps us from wholeness. From the shalom we're called to seek.

It's our lack of trust. It's our inability to grasp the story we've heard a thousand times. That blessed, redemptive gospel story And that story is ours, if we could only remember...

And maybe that's part of the problem. We've heard the stories so many times we've stopped listening. We've forgotten. We've tuned them out. Somewhere in the recesses of our minds we know them. Somewhere in the repetition of our liturgy we can piece them together. But ask some of us how we're being transformed, and you may as well start counting the blank stares. And far too often, those stares are mine, too...sometimes I just don't get it. Sometimes, my heart, like Israel's is hardened.

And in the midst of all our anxiety, in the midst of our meager defense of our own self-centered lives, God speaks, God promises, God's throat clears:

The days are surely coming. Those days will surely come. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when a new covenant will be made.

Those days are coming when God will write love on our arms, will inscribe the truth on our hearts. Those days are coming when we will understand, when we will not only know about, but truly and deeply understand and experience God's love and forgiveness that transforms lives.

Are you ready?

Those days are coming when we will truly live, when we will truly, wholeheartedly believe, and such belief will embody the history of God's faithfulness – those stories we've forgotten or otherwise ignored.

Do you believe?

Those days are coming when we will truly live what we *claim* to believe. Those days are coming when the church, the body of Christ will actively live out its faith, will embrace its place in God's mission for others, against the world's odds, and against the world's better judgment.

Will you be transformed by the renewing of your heart, your soul, your mind?

A called-out people, a chosen people. A people whose lives are transformed by the story, by the reality of God's redeeming love. A people with God's love tattooed on our arms, with love inscribed on our hearts. A people who have recovered our call, living God's story in this broken world.

Do you know which stories are ours?

No longer shall we simply teach each other. No longer will we have to remind one another what it's like to know the Lord, as though such trivia will help pass some entrance exam. One day, one day soon, by God's grace,

In the face of homelessness we will build houses. When sexuality is reduced to commodity, we will enter into faithful covenant. If our children are taken from us, we will take them back. Where the powers engage in domination, we will embrace sacrifice. Where creation is despoiled, we'll plant gardens. And where our wealth is taken from us, we will give it freely away.

Then we will know that the law is written on our hearts. That God's love is tattooed on our arms. This is God's call to each of us. And while we await God's new covenant, may we seek to build God's kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.