

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Lent 5B, Sunday, March 22, 2015  
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

For many years, the rock band U2 has sung the heart and soul of a generation. Their popularity has waned more recently, but in their earlier days, U2's songs of lament and hope, of joy and despair, resonated deeply with millions such that in 2013, *Rolling Stone* magazine ranked them number 22 on their list of "100 Greatest Artists of All Time." A part-Catholic, part-Protestant Irish band formed in the late 1970's, the Troubles in Northern Ireland were a source of great pain for U2. On their 1983 album titled "War," they lamented a particular incident of the Irish Troubles in the opening song "Sunday Bloody Sunday." After the militaristic drum beginning, the lyrics start: "I can't believe the news today... I can't close my eyes and make it go away... how long... how long must we sing this song?" The song continues as a passionate, almost angry plea, until under the repeated refrain "Sunday bloody Sunday," the final lyric comes: "the real battle just begun, to claim the victory Jesus won..."

The album ends with the song titled "40." It is an interpretation of Psalm 40, with the lyrics coming directly from the first 3 verses of the Psalm, except for the refrain: "how long to sing this song?" I think it's a reference back to the lament of Sunday Bloody Sunday, but this time the lament is combined with the hope: "I will sing a new song to the Lord my God." I'm told that for many years, U2 ended their concerts with this simple song and its repeated refrain of lament and hope. The band would exit the stage as thousands upon thousands of concert-goers remained standing and singing their own lament and hope... "I will sing... sing a new song... How long to sing this song? How long? How long?"

The first people to sing such passionate lament and hope were Israelites who lived through trauma in the sixth century before Christ. At that time, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem until finally the famine became so severe in the city that the wall was breached, the soldiers fled, and King Zedekiah of Judah, along with his family, was captured and either killed or lead away in chains to prison in Babylon. Solomon's Temple was looted and burned and the priests and other elites were either killed or exiled, leaving only the poorest people of the land to till the blood soaked soil. God's promise of descendants to Abraham, of land to Moses and of an everlasting throne to David were all swept away in the destruction. God's covenants - unilateral and bilateral covenants alike - eternal covenants made and fulfilled over generations, came to an end, or so it seemed, to the people who were left to pick up the pieces of their faith in a foreign land.

The Book of Jeremiah covers the entire sweep of this critical moment in history - from the sweeping reforms of the celebrated Judean King Josiah to the darkest days of exile in Babylon. The prophetic words within the Book mirror the history as they morph with the changing circumstances. Oracles of warning and judgement transform into calls for repentance and finally give way to words of consolation and comfort to the broken people of a broken community. Jeremiah's prophetic response to the trauma of exile includes 3 different types or

modes of prayer found also in other parts of scripture... they are lament, penitence and hope.

The short passage we hear today falls into the third mode - that of hope. It is taken from near the end of Jeremiah's Book of Consolation beginning in chapter 30 with words of hope and promise echoed today: "For the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the Lord, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors and they shall take possession of it." (30:3) Jeremiah tells the people on behalf of God, that the promises so broken down are not yet over and then goes on for 2 full chapters to build a case for hope: God hears their cries of panic, of terror and of no peace; God has a proven history of forgiveness and restoration following times of trouble; reversal of fortunes have always been part of the flow of life... princes are brought down, mourning is turned to dancing, water flows over the thirsty ground. Covenants will be made anew. It has happened before... it will happen again.

And so we hear this hope today: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with [my people]..." The language of newness is found in other exilic literature, particularly the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah, who all envision some kind of new deal between God and the people. But the language of covenant, of new covenant, is unique to this passage in Jeremiah. Ezekiel speaks of a new heart and new spirit... a new experience of God that means God's Torah will no longer need to be taught but rather will be known by the people from the inside, out. Only Jeremiah raises such visions, such dreams of a restored future, to the level of covenantal promise.

Literally translated, the expression "I will make a new covenant" would be "I will cut a new covenant." "Cutting a covenant" was a common, traditional, way of describing the process of covenant-making, in part because it involved sacrificing an animal. It is also language reminiscent of the sign of the covenant with Abraham - cutting of the foreskin... and of the consequence of being "cut off" from the people if the covenant is broken. In using such a common and loaded phrase, the prophet uses strong rhetoric in preaching hope to the people. It also serves to link the promised new covenant to the covenants that have gone before... the promise to Abraham and in the next verse a clear connection is made with the Mosaic covenant from the wilderness, concluding: "I will be their God and they shall be my people." The recitation of this core creedal confession, forever linking Yahweh with the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness and beyond, means we can rest assured that the promised new covenant will simply be a new expression of an old idea.

Utterly new and yet thoroughly ancient... the new covenant comes "by divine reversal... a change in the heart of God toward the people," (NIB, 812) for God says: "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more," and this change in God's heart will be reflected in the hearts of the people with a covenant that doesn't need to be taught but will be known from within. The change in God "is not all that surprising because it has happened again and again..." and yet this promise represents a radical departure in its newness. (NIB, 812)

The language of "new covenant" might be unique in the Old Testament here in Jeremiah but we are certainly familiar with it from the New Testament. As such, it is almost impossible to hear a prophetic word like that of Jeremiah today and not immediately think of Jesus. That does not mean, however, that Jeremiah somehow saw through the ages to predict Jesus' life, death and resurrection. What it does mean is that as a faithful prophet schooled in Israel's history and

literature, and upon seeking for hope in a time of extreme distress, Jeremiah saw that God had consistently found a way for life to come out of death for the people God had already committed to love. And so Jeremiah drew strength from that history and tradition and declared the hope that God will once again bear grief for the sake of love, and act with grace towards the people by making another promise.

That people of faith so many generations later saw in Jesus a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophetic word from God means that the process of understanding current events through the lens of traditional faith continued. The author of Hebrews quotes this passage from Jeremiah as part of an explanation of Jesus' role as a heavenly high priest and both Paul and Luke write the promise into their stories of the Last Supper, having Jesus himself say: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." And so the ancient tradition of God's covenant being confirmed with a sign... in this case, the sign of wine... continues. In being part of this new covenant with God through Christ, we are grafted into a long line of faithful people. It doesn't undo or supersede previous covenants as some believe, including the author of the Book of Hebrews, but rather expands and renews God's relationship with humanity.

The story of that relationship has undergone many trials and tribulations over the years... both in the broad sweep of history and in the private lives of individual believers. As such, we cannot be reminded too often of God's great and creative faithfulness throughout time, because the memory of it - the memory of that faithfulness - gets us through our difficult times of suffering and sorrow. It is through the ritual act of remembering that ancient promises are brought into the present, and give us hope.

This is what U2 understood in a deep way and why in singing songs of lament, they brought peace and hope to a generation. Their music expressed the pain and desires of their own hearts just as much as Jeremiah's words expressed his. We would do well to follow their example, and the examples of lament and penitence and hope we find throughout scripture, as we prepare to enter the holiest week of the year, beginning next Sunday. May the hope of God's promised new covenant carry us through the dark days to come.