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Proper 24, Year C
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Jeremiah 31: 27-34
Psalms 119: 97-104
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18: 1-8

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, My Rock, and My Redeemer. Psalm 19: 14

The days are surely coming, says the Lord...

Jeremiah is a book that offers comfort and consolation to the people of Israel following the Babylonian exile — it provides hope to a people who may have lost all hope. The words today, from the book of Jeremiah, signify the promise of a faithful God to a devastated people for restoration.

Our Bibles are divided into Old and New Testaments — the stories of the people of God in Israel (the Old Testament) and the people of God in the Church (the New Testament).

The division of the Bible, into Old and New Testaments is based on two covenants through which God revealed His will over time — the dividing line between them is Jesus Christ — because in the person of Jesus — something shifted.

Given that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, it is odd that we often regard them as so radically different.

The covenants are the expression of God's will for us. Since both are based on God's will, there is no doctrinal difference between the two covenants. They explain the relationship we are to have with God. In the Old Testament, we are given the revelation of who God is and how we are to live as his people, and God's will is conveyed to his people through the external law.

In the New Testament, God's will becomes available as an internal principle of life. The Old Testament presents a standard by which we are measured. It is a matter of command and requirement, like a carpenter's plumb line, that measures people on a pass/fail basis.

The New Testament is based on grace and giving. It is not by our effort that we live up to God's will — because we can't, but rather success—being acceptable to God— is a gift from God.

Before Christ — humans were responsible for making the precepts of the law the property of their hearts. With Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit, God places the law directly in believers' hearts.

We do not know how to obtain the promises of God as sinners without having a relationship with God. The covenants provide us a means to restore our sin-broken relationship with God. The Old Covenant, in the form of the law given through Moses, revealed the nature of God and delivered the human requirements for reconciliation —it amounted to an impossible standard.

The New Covenant, recognizes the impossibility and provides a remedy in Jesus Christ.

The people in Jeremiah's time were well aware of this reality, having failed to please God and were punished for it.

The people of Jeremiah's day had lived through a time when the Babylonians had invaded Judah, assaulted Jerusalem, reduced the temple to rubble, exiled and killed the royal family, and the majority of

the population — because of their disobedience and failure to recognize God — they had turned to other god and they were in chaos.

Families have been ravaged by grief and loss; those left behind from being taken would have been those who had no worth, in strength or skill — they would have had to scramble to find a place to live and people to be with — they have been struggling to survive.

But God in the words of Jeremiah was bringing hope. The days were coming when things would change and God would watch over them and “build and plant” — there was hope.

Perhaps most significantly, in Jeremiah 31: 29, God promises to cease holding subsequent generations responsible for the transgressions of previous ones: “In those days, they shall no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’. Instead, according to verse 30, “all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.”

The remission of sins from the past generation; of not being held responsible for what came before — gave everyone hope. No specific date was given to them, just “the days are surely coming...”

The new covenant does not invalidate the Old, but rather the transmission of it — it will be written our hearts. The New covenant requires no work to receive or adopt it.

I am taking a class on Fridays that has been speaking of “inclusion” and the importance of “including” all those that come into the life of our parish. Statistically, if someone visits and we do not make efforts to include them in one or two Sundays; they will not stay.

Inclusion is a two way process, our job is to welcome and to have places where a newcomer can fit themselves in to the life of the parish, and their job (or your job) is to include themselves. The person has to desire to participate.

Contrary to the work that is required to include yourself in the life of a parish, there is no work required to receive or adopt the New Covenant — the work was done for you in and through the person of Jesus Christ — the work becomes modeling our lives to reflect more of Christ and less of ourselves, not for fear of salvation; but because when we become followers of Christ and name ourselves as his disciples, it changes our priorities in this world and we work on who we are and who we are becoming, to reflect more of Christ.

In our Gospel passage today we have a parable that is often titled “the persistent widow”.

A widow kept coming before an unjust judge asking for justice against her opponent. To be a widow in the ancient Near East was to be among the most vulnerable in society. As a widow, this woman would have had no advocate, no one to help plead her case. She was helpless. But she had a will to persist; to not give up, to demand that someone listened to her. Since she had nothing to lose, this probably increased her boldness and gave her strength.

Pursuing justice requires perseverance. The ability for individuals and communities to persist in seeking justice is what helps change the world. The slaves weren't freed immediately upon the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The unrighteous judge eventually does what is right, but only because the nagging woman made him feel trapped. He does not respond out of a changed heart - and societal change is like this too. Rarely are things changed because of a change of heart.

Our work, our job is to persist, to advocate for ourselves when we feel helpless and to advocate for others when they are most vulnerable. God's justice is more comprehensive than what can or will be achieved through legislation or our court system. If an

unrighteousness judge can be merciful in the face of a persistent woman, how much more merciful is God toward each of us?

The Gospel passage begins with how we are to interpret it, "Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Luke 18: 1

We are to pray always and not lose heart. Which can be easier said than done, when our praying sometimes may seem to heed no change.

Our passage from 1 Timothy this morning — is an exhortation to Timothy and the listening congregation to pursue that which they have been called to,

"I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully." 2 Timothy 4: 3-5

It is the same message I would give to us today.

Proclaim the message. Be persistent. Convince, rebuke, encourage — with the utmost patience.

That is what we are called to do as God's people. People under a New Covenant — where the plan of salvation has already been played out. Divine grace has been given us to do the work we have been given to do. We are to be

persistent in this work — joining together as one body to bring the love of God to our community.

Amen.