

Lent 5B  
Jeremiah 31:31-35

Pastor Wayne Peterson  
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There are times when current circumstances in your life cause a Bible passage to jump out and grab you in a way it had never done before. That's why it is important to keep studying the Bible. It's not that the Bible changes over the years, but we do, and therefore the Bible always has the potential to say something fresh to us in our new situation.

This past week, it was the reading from Jeremiah that jumped out at me. Through the prophet Jeremiah, the LORD God speaks a word of promise and hope to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Let's pause there a moment to make sure we understand to whom Jeremiah is speaking.

In the overview of the Old Testament that I do as part of our "Starting" class, I point out that the word "Israel" has at least four different meanings. First, Israel is an alternate name for Jacob, grandson of Abraham. Second, it can refer to the family of Jacob – the twelve sons of Israel or the people of Israel. Third, it can refer to the land where the people of Israel live – the land of Israel. And fourth, it can refer to a country that existed for 200 years, from the death of Solomon in 922 B.C. until the Assyrian empire pretty much wiped it off the map in 721 B.C. This Northern Kingdom of Israel was paired with the Southern Kingdom of Judah, which managed to dodge the Assyrian bullet and continued on for another 130 years until the Babylonian empire besieged the city of Jerusalem in 587. That's the point we're at when Jeremiah speaks these words. In this context, the house of Israel and the house of Judah are two countries, one of which (Israel) is no longer in existence and the other (Judah) is about to be destroyed. But together, they represent all of the descendents of Abraham, with whom the LORD God had made a covenant promising that God would bless all the nations of the world through Abraham's descendents. Later, the LORD God made another covenant at Mount Sinai with Moses and the descendents of Abraham, giving them the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone.

Now, says Jeremiah, the LORD God makes another promise in the face of what appears to be a hopeless situation, with the house of Israel destroyed and the house of Judah on the verge of being destroyed. "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. But this is the covenant that I will make with them – I will put my law within them; I will not write it on tablets of stone, but will write it directly on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

It's that last line that jumped out and grabbed me this past week. "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Most of you are aware that my dad died two months ago. In the three years leading up to his death, he lived with a progressive disease called Lewy Body Dementia. Lewy bodies are accumulations of protein in the brain which cause cognitive impairment and memory loss. It has a different physiological cause than Alzheimer's, but the end result, loss of memory, is much the same.

On a physiological level, the ability to remember something is absolutely awe inspiring. Somehow millions of minute electrical impulses dance among the neurons in our brain almost instantaneously and are able to retrieve memories of events just a few moments ago or many years ago. It was hard to watch my dad's memory system develop glitches, yet if I could disassociate myself a bit, it was also fascinating to observe how some memory file cabinets remained open while others were stuck shut. My dad could remember every house he lived in except his current house which he had lived in for over twenty years. He could tell me the address of an apartment he rented in 1953 and recite the entire funeral liturgy from memory, but he could not remember how to get back to his room.

So you can maybe understand why I thought of my dad when I read the phrase, "I will remember their sin no more." It sounds like God, out of love for the people of Israel, has developed memory loss, selective memory loss we assume, but memory loss nonetheless. This is an uncomfortable thought for me. Memory is so central to who my dad was, to who we are, which is of course what makes dementia so terrifying. If we lose our memory, we wonder, are we really ourselves? If we lose our memory, what do we have left? This is a fear for many of us.

And yet it sounds like the God of Israel *chooses* to forget. What are we to make of this? Is this a metaphor, a dramatic play of words? Has God really forgotten their sins? Their worship of foreign gods just forgotten? Ignoring or taking advantage of the poor – entirely erased from the hard drive? Can God really totally forget? And, if so, what else might God have forgotten?

I have many times read these words that God forgets my sins, and a similar image from Psalm 103, which reads, "As far as the east is from the west, so far the Lord removes our transgressions from us" – which is about the same as saying they are forgotten. After experiencing my dad's dementia, the suggestion that God forgets is rather jarring and bothersome.

On the other hand, I recognize that memory is a two-edged sword, both gift and curse. There are things I wish I *could* forget – quite a few, actually. It would be wonderful to forget some of the stupid, hurtful things I've said or done over the years which hurt the feelings of some of the people I love most. It would be wonderful to forget every minor slight and criticism that I have received and seem to hold onto, which even though they may have taken place years ago, often keep me awake at night because I am unable to forget, to let them go. In these instances, the loss of memory would actually be a blessing.

If God forgets in a positive way, might we also? I'd like to try something with you that was suggested in an article I read this week written by David Lose, who wrote the book, *Making Sense of the Cross*, that we are using in our Lenten series. I'd like you to take a few moments and call to mind one difficult memory of something that you wish that *God* would forget: perhaps an unkind word or deed which you regret. Got one? Okay, now call to mind one thing that you wish you could forget: some slight or hurt or betrayal or disappointment that continues to simmer within you, always ready to be brought to a full boil at a moment's notice.

Do you have them – one thing you wish God would forget and one thing you wish you were able to forget? Okay, now imagine holding them in each of your hands. Now listen as I read this promise of the new covenant again, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Now I invite you open the hand in which you are holding the thing you wish God would forget and release it. You can do this because, indeed, God already has forgotten it. There is no reason for us to hang on to it anymore. It is forgiven and forgotten.

In your other hand you are still holding on to whatever it is that you wish you could forget, the hurt that keeps gnawing at you over and over. Sometime in this coming week, maybe it's when you come forward to receive communion today, maybe it is when you are out for a walk or lying in bed with your head on the pillow -- sometime in this coming week I invite you to open the other hand and let that hurt go. Release it. Ironically, doing this doesn't benefit the person you are forgiving so much as it benefits you. Forgiveness is a unilateral action. It only takes one person. When you forgive, you are the one who is released from carrying that load that has been weighing you down. In no way do I mean to imply that doing this forgiving will be easy. Neither do I suggest that you will totally forget the hurt or the pain. I think it is probably true that only God is able to forgive and completely forget.

You know the tradition of giving up something for Lent. I don't know if that is part of your tradition, but giving up the hurt that you are still holding in your hand might be the most beneficial thing you give up this Lenten season. It will be an answer to prayer, actually, for we pray persistently "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." If you find that it's really hard to pry those fingers open and let it go, talk to Pastor Jacqui, Aaron, Deaconess Brenda, or me. We're in the forgiveness business.

This next hymn (#543, "Go, My Children, with My Blessing") is typically sung at the end of a worship service, but I think this song of blessing is a good summary of the new covenant Jeremiah foretold and which becomes effective in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Pay particular attention to the second stanza, and remember the promise: "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

"Go, my children, sins forgiven, at peace and pure.  
Here you learned how much I love you, what I can cure.  
Here you heard my dear Son's story, here you touched him, saw his glory.  
Go, my children, sins forgiven, at peace and pure." *(Text by Jaroslav Vajda)*

This sermon was inspired by David Lose's article, "Love and Memory",  
posted on the WorkingPreacher.org website 3/18/2010.