

Sermon March 17, 2024

Written on Our Hearts

Sir, we wish to see Jesus.

Don't we all understand that? We want to join our voices with those unnamed men. We all have moments where we share that desperate desire to get a glimpse of the sacred. We don't have the chance to see Jesus, face to face; but we have the stories. Passed on through time. And we have the covenantal promises that are as powerful today as they were when the people first received them.

This Lenten Season, we have remembered those covenantal promises: the rainbow arching through a rain-soaked sky... a night sky filled with glimmering stars... heavy tablets etched with sacred words to live by...

Even when the people stumble or forget, Our God is faithful and endures and is true to these sacred promises.

We are told that as Moses made his way down the mountain, carrying those heavy stone tablets that bore the new Laws to live by, the ancient Israelites had already broken the first Commandment. The people have lost faith and turned to ancient Egyptian ways of worship, melting down their gold and forming it into a sacred cow that they can worship.

They are not really known for their faithfulness or perseverance.

For 40 years, they have shown themselves to be an argumentative, impulsive, difficult group of people. This is why it takes them so long to find their way out of the wilderness; they're inability to follow God or Moses just leads them deeper and deeper into the darkness.

But through it out, they treasure those tablets. They protect them. They care for them. And as they finally emerge out of the wilderness and stand on the shores of the Jordan River, their hearts still broken by the death of their beloved Moses, they followed God's instructions as given to their new leader.

Just as their grandparents had stepped into the waters of the Red Sea and watched the waters part, so did they watch the waters of the Jordan part, so they could carry their beloved Law – the Ark of the Covenant - safely to the Promised Land.

Throughout the generations, the love and respect of the Law continued... at least up to a point. Generations later, Solomon built a beautiful Temple which housed the Ark of the Covenant. The beloved tablets, treasured for generations, were given a place of distinction in God's own house.

But the people were still impulsive... they were no longer in the wilderness, but they often forgot who brought them to the Promised Land. Their words and actions did not reflect the covenantal promises that were reflected in the Law. And the further away they drifted, the more at risk they became. They never imagined that their place in the Promised Land would be at risk or that the Ark of the Covenant could be destroyed.

So, imagine how the people's hearts broke when a conquering army invades their country, takes their king away in chains, destroys their Temple and shatters the tablets into dust.

The Law is shattered... Leaders dragged into exile... families torn apart... communities destroyed and the fabric of their faith destroyed forever.

The Commandments etched on the tablets were different than God's other Covenants. The rainbow and stars were so far away, the grains of sand could wash away. But the Law: you could see it, you could read it, you could (if you were brave enough) even touch it. When you stood before the Ark in the Temple, you knew you stood in the presence of God. This Covenant brought God closer to the people.

And now their hearts were broken.

Our hearts are important. They are the center of our being. They are where we say love lives. They are what we give to one another. And when we grieve, it feels as if it literally shatters into pieces.

We all know what it feels like to have our hearts broken. To have our hopes and dreams shattered like those tablets. Jenni knew what this felt like. When she was a teenager, her father was shot and killed by a 16-year-old during a robbery. Ten years later, as she planned her wedding, her heart broke again as she realized once again that her father would not be there to walk her down the aisle. As the wedding date came closer, her heart was heavy, and she could not truly enjoy the experience of planning.

We all know what it is like to be pulled back into the wilderness. To be stranded in exile. To look at times of joy and only feel what is missing. Jenni felt it. We feel it. The people of Israel felt it.

And God sent us words of Hope. The prophet Jeremiah reaches out to those in Exile and across the span of time: "Don't worry," he said. "God is still with you. God has never left you. God is with the people in the wilderness and in Exile, and not just in the Promised Land. And God is offering a new Covenant. This one cannot be broken by the people. This one cannot be shattered by enemies. This one is permanent and indelible. God's new covenant is written on our hearts."

Sacred love comes to us in the most remarkable ways. The people stranded in Exile experienced it when they thought they had been left alone forever. Six hundred years later, the people experienced it again as Jesus showed them what new life really looks like. And we experience it today, in our interactions with one another... sometimes in the most surprising way.

Jenni could not let go of her grief, so she decided to do something about it. She decided to reach out to the man who had received her father's heart donation. She wrote him a letter that said: "I am the daughter of the man who's heart beats inside of you. Will you please walk me down the aisle?" The first time they met each other, she was able to put her hand on his chest and feel her father's heart beat. And, as she walked down the aisle, she knew her father was truly with her.

She knew his love was written on his heart.

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.

God promises to write that that covenant of love on our hearts. To transform us from within. With God's love etched on our hearts, we can never be truly alone. What God wants and has always wanted is not to control us, but to be with us... to comfort us... to challenge us to be our best... to encourage us when we need it most. That is the history of our God, who shows us over and over that God wants to be in relationship with each of us. And isn't that our story too? During the most difficult times, those times in the wilderness or in exile... those times when we feel the most alone... somehow, against all odds, we encounter the sacred presence once again. We reach out and feel God's heartbeat and realize that it is the beating of our own hearts. Hearts that are engraved with words of God's Holy Love.

God comes to us when we need it most. Today we are reminded that God's love lives in the center of our being... in our very hearts.