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Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía
Hempstead, New York
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The Fifth Sunday in Lent B ~ March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 51:1-12, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: Amen

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.” (Jer. 31:31-32.)

When were those days, you will ask me? Did humanity reach that point and then, somehow, fall out of its covenant relationship with the Lord? No, we haven’t seen those days yet. God is still at work in and on us to reach this new covenant, through the action of the Holy Spirit.

It might be helpful for us to consider the prophet’s words in the context in which they were spoken. It was sometime in 586 BC that the Kingdom of Judah, the sole undefeated of the chosen people, that the people heard once again from Jeremiah. He had been warning them for years that they had strayed from God, and that there would be consequences to pay. Now, the Babylonian army had surrounded Jerusalem and besieged the city. They were about to

be defeated. Their institutions had failed; they were starving. They were facing oppression at the hands of their enemy. And Jeremiah announced to them,

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. (Jer. 31:33-34.)

Ah, you’ll ask, when were ‘those days?’ Well, we’re still in the midst of them. There were the days of the next 47 years when the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon, feeling that God had abandoned them. But God had just captured their attention because the words of numerous prophets hadn’t been able to do so. After the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians in 538 BC, then King Cyrus sent the people, led by Ezra the priest, back to the promised

land to rebuild the temple, and Solomon's palace, and the city of Jerusalem and the whole of Judah and Israel, previously the Northern Kingdom.

It was after that, you'll say, that "those days" occurred. But no, although God was still with the chosen people, they weren't able to carry out the rebuilding. They fell from faithfulness in worship and weren't able to complete the civic renewal. About 83 years later, (in 445-444 BC), the next Persian King, Artaxerxes, sent Nehemiah, his Judahite cupbearer to lead the renewed rebuilding of Judah. And Nehemiah succeeded in his task.

So are we in the time after those days? you'll ask. No. There is no temple in Jerusalem, is there? There is no palace. The chosen people waited for the arrival of the Messiah, the descendant of King David, throughout 450 years. They didn't recognize him in Jesus of Nazareth. They were destroyed by the Roman armies in 70 AD. Once again, the chosen people had strayed from God and God had to grab their attention in the only way they seemed to understand – military defeat. They were still waiting. But they still had the promise.

And now, we have inherited the promise, to share it with them. And we're still waiting. ***But we still have the promise.*** We are awaiting the ***second*** coming of Jesus of Nazareth. God is calling us to faithfulness in worship and in our everyday lives. God's Spirit is at work within us and among us.

What is the effect of the promise spoken by Jeremiah to us in the year – or two – of the COVID pandemic? Was the death of thousands of people in nursing homes and long-term care facilities the kind of institutional break-down that the people of Jerusalem had experienced almost 2700 years ago? Is the on-going racial violence in our country by people with less melanin in their skin against people with more, the kind of institutional break-down that the people of Jerusalem had experienced? Is our apparent refusal to share the abundance of this land with people living with less, living with violence in their homelands, the kind of institutional break-down that the people of Jerusalem had experienced?

We are approaching the end of our season of preparation for the commemoration once again of

the death of Jesus through crucifixion – assassination. Next Sunday, we will rehearse once again the whipsaw reaction of the people of his day, from praising him and calling out, “Save us, Lord!” to calling out five days later to Pontius Pilate, “Crucify him!” “Those days” still had not come. But the people of God still had the promise.

How will we live our lives so that our vision will be more effective than that of our spiritual forebears, for millennia? Will we recognize God’s law written on our hearts? Will we recognize the Son of God coming to earth for a second time to bring God’s people to live in eternity? What will it take?

Jesus gave his life to save the people of his promise. This was the purpose for which he became incarnate: to save. “[U]nless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24.) Jesus was that grain of wheat. And much fruit has been borne through his death, resurrection and ascension.

So he tells us, who claim to be his followers, “[t]hose who love their life lose it, and those who

hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me.” (John 12:25-26a.)

God has walked with us through this pandemic, despite the fact that our nation chose a leader who would not protect his people by taking precautions to limit the effect of the virus. We almost chose him again. But now, with a new leader, we seem to be gaining some control over the virus through vaccination. We seem to be able, slowly, to return to reliance on our institutions.

But we still have episodes of violence taking the lives of others, including most recently, Asian-American women, even those in their 60’s, allegedly to remove temptation from a sex-addicted white man. I must ask, does this make any sense to you? I just don’t understand it.

Jesus has promised us, “where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.” (John 12:26bc.)

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We're still waiting. But we still have the promise. How can we convey the urgency of God's Word? How can we reach and teach our children to "know the Lord?" Can we find the path back to faithfulness? Will we, like the Greeks, ask to "see Jesus?"

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen