



The Reverend Emily Williams Guffey, Rector
March 21, 2021
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 51:1-13, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33

The sun is beaming, colors are flashing up from the cool earth, and we dare flash smiles, let hope beam upon us, and savor the glory of life emerging - finally, surely.

As Lent began, we sang (in a version of Psalm 51), "Lord, you fashioned the heavens, you gathered the seas. Can you create a new heart in me?"¹ And it may be that God *has* - that God *has* created you anew throughout the bleak long winter, in the unrelenting dark, in the frigid earth. It may be that you will be born anew, and that you will emerge from this, all of this, a new person--not the person you were a year ago, or even six months ago, or three months ago, maybe not yet aware of how you've changed, maybe not yet sure in your newborn skin.

Last week, Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote a prayer, that a year ago we would learn "what we could lose and still live anyway"; we would learn "where we would find comfort and where it would elude us"; we would learn "whose lives matter to whom" and "why we have kitchens in our homes".² And now, approaching spring and the opening up of social practices, Bolz-Weber continued, "I'm both thrilled and kind of scared about that. Because I'm not who I was a year ago. I want so badly to hug my friends again and laugh again and have amazing conversations again, and yet I am not sure how long I could do any of this before crying. My emotional protective gear," she continued, "has worn so thin, and grief just leaks everywhere now."

Grief was leaking everywhere amid the people of Israel, as they found themselves in exile after the Babylonians destroyed their temple and took them into captivity - not just for one year but for years. We understand that the prophet Jeremiah was ministering among them before and during the exile, first "wailing and smashing pots, trying to get the people to see that their idolatrous ways will lead" to destruction, and now in that distress beyond their imagining, here in chapter 31 his words are of hope. Hope. Hope that "despite injustice and exploitation," hope that "despite idolatry," hope that "despite all the ways the people have broken faith with God - God will not break faith with them."³ Out of destruction, God will bring hope. Out of the depths, God will bring light. Out of death, God will bring life.

How? Your faith is not broken, Jeremiah counsels. Your faith has not been destroyed, left for looters to pillage, forgotten, distant. Your faith is not over there. It is where you are. It is within you. "I will put my law within

¹ "Psalm 51: Create Me Again" by Rory Cooney

² "Sunday Prayers with Nadia Bolz-Weber", March 14, 2021

³ Richard Floyd, "Jeremiah 31:34, Pastoral Perspective", *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 122

you,” the Lord says through Jeremiah. “I will write it on your hearts, and I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

“No longer will the words of love be engraved on stone and displayed in buildings for all to see but none to follow. The days are surely coming” [and have now come] when these words will be engraved in our hearts and displayed in our lives. No longer will know of God over there, of God in a certain, singular place, but the days are surely coming [and have now come] “when the people from the least to the greatest,” from the east to the west, the north to the south, “will know God, with all the intimacy that word entails”,⁴ will know God within. We’ll know God in our heartbeats and our breath - and we nevermore will take that for granted, and we nevermore will forget, we nevermore will be afraid, and we will live in that Word alone.

In John we hear the only agricultural metaphor in that Gospel, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Two things about this: 1) You have what you need. Like our ancestors, what you need is within you. It is not out there; it is not out of reach; it is not in someone else’s possession. It is yours.

2) There is no way out but through. Life comes through death, not by avoiding it. “Glory,” says Sam Wells whose scripture discussions I listen to regularly, “is found through the cross, not by avoiding it or creating an existence where you never have to think of terrible things. Glory is in the tomb, not by never smelling the tomb.”⁵ Glory belongs to God, who *is* glorified through the cross, who brings us along with Godself through death into new life.

Here we are, already becoming new, amid terrible things, and beautiful things. Bolz-Weber concluded her prayer, “I am so afraid that I will never be who I once was. And I am also afraid that I will be. (Not to mention, I’m not entirely clear what size jeans I wear as the me I am now.) And yet, when I quiet my anxious thoughts, I start to suspect that I am closer to the me you have always known and always loved. So help me trust that, Lord. As things change, help us be gentle with ourselves and with each other. We are all wearing newborn skin right now. Amen.”

⁴ Ibid., 124

⁵ Sam Wells and Sally Hitchiner, March 16, 2021