

A New Covenant
Jeremiah 31:31-34
December 3, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

I have a confession: I am directionally challenged. I don't know which way is north. Or east or west or south, for that matter. I can sometimes memorize clues about this—I know that my house faces east, for example—and I can use those clues painstakingly to figure out which way I am facing if I am near my house, but I can get turned around again in a heartbeat. I can get distracted by what I see around me. Sometimes I am absolutely sure that I have figured it out and I know which way to go, and I drive off confidently in exactly the wrong direction.

Dave generously tries not to laugh when I do this, though I do notice a tiny grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He doesn't suffer from my problem, thank goodness, or we would be perpetually lost! He really doesn't understand why I don't "get it," why I don't just know how to make my way home from almost anywhere, why I don't have an internal compass that orients me to true north.

This is especially a problem when we are out on the lake in our little boat. I have a boating license, I am proud to say. When New Hampshire first required boating licenses, I studied really hard, and I scored 100 on the test!

I learned all the names of the parts of the boat, including how to spell gunwale. I learned speed limits on the lakes. I learned who has right of way in various situations. And I learned to pass south and west of a red buoy and north and east of a black one. But there's the rub: I don't know which way is north.

I know the rules. I can pass the test. But I can't navigate on the lake. At all. Ever. So, my boating license sits uselessly in the glove compartment of the boat, and Dave drives, while I enjoy the ride. If I drove, we would be hopelessly mired on hidden rocks, or lost forever, somewhere down around the Weirs.

For me the cardinal directions are just book learning, something outside of me. So, I easily get distracted or turned around. I get lost. Dave has internalized the cardinal directions. He knows them by heart. He can navigate.

The people of Israel lacked a sense of direction, too, and in Jeremiah's day (about 600 years before Jesus was born), they had really lost their way. To understand this passage, we have to read it in the context of what has come before. Earlier in the book of Jeremiah, we read that the people had gone off course in at least two ways:

First, they got distracted by what they could see around them. They began to worship the gods of their neighbors, right alongside their worship of Yahweh. And they trusted in the king and in powerful neighbors to protect them, rather than simply living in the way God called them to live. Though they followed the rules, the technicalities of worship, they had stopped living in a faithful, covenantal relationship with God.

And second, Jeremiah – and other prophets – tell us that the people of Israel had also stopped living in covenantal relationship with one another. One of the truly radical features of the relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel was the fact that all of the people were supposed to be equal with each other and equal before God.

People weren't supposed to buy land, for example, because all of the Promised Land belonged to Yahweh. Each family was assigned its own plot, and they were forbidden to sell it. This was wildly different from all the surrounding cultures. But the people of Israel managed to get around this rule on a technicality: wealthier people would take advantage of their poor neighbors when they were in distress by lending them money with the land as security. Then when a bad crop year came, the poor people were unable to pay their debt on time. They ended up as indentured laborers for the wealthy, unable ever to satisfy their debt or reclaim their land. Today we would call this "debt slavery." The people of Israel lacked the internal compass to tell them that just because this was legal didn't make it right.

So, the rich became richer and the poor became poorer. There was huge income inequality, and an even greater gap in accumulated wealth between the richest people and the poorest. And the prophets tell us that this was a great sin, an abomination, in the eyes of God, right up there with worshipping false gods, because both of these sins violated the essential relationship between God and the people.

So, the people of Israel lacked the internal sense of direction that they needed to navigate life in the Promised Land as the people of God, what with worship of other gods going on all around them, with the ever-present temptation to grow rich at the expense of their neighbors, and with huge armies from Egypt and Assyria and Babylonia marching through the territory every couple of years, fighting with each other, demanding tribute from Israel, and catching tiny Israel in their cross-fire. Despite having a covenant with God, who had been faithful to them throughout history, despite having a simple set of rules to keep them in covenant with one another, they lost their way.

It was clear to Jeremiah that a catastrophe was looming, and he had tried to give the people directions to avert it. "Stop," he said. "Turn this way." But they didn't listen, because they were absolutely sure that they knew which way to go, and they went off confidently – as I do – in exactly the wrong direction.

By the time we get to today's passage from Jeremiah, the people of Israel have lost their way so profoundly that they find themselves in exile in Babylon with no way home. The Temple they trusted in was destroyed. Their king blinded and captive. And at just this point, God sends this beautiful message of comfort: "I will make a new covenant. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.... I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." What beautiful assurance!

As Christians, we understand this New Covenant to be the same covenant of forgiveness that we celebrate whenever we share the bread and cup of Communion. It is the covenant that God whispers to each of our hearts. "Love me. Love your neighbor. Work for justice for all my beloved children."

Sometimes we lose our way. Sometimes we put our trust and faith in what we can see around us instead of trusting the God we know in our hearts. Sometimes we fail to love our neighbors as we should. And we all live in a nation where the rich are getting a lot richer and the poor are getting poorer. Sometimes we go SO far astray – individually or as a nation - that we must just break God's heart.

But we don't have to navigate alone. God is the one who can always draw a straight line from whatever messes we have made of our lives to wherever we need to be. God has written the new law in our hearts: Love God. Love our neighbor. Work for justice for all of God's beloved children. And there we will find our true North Star.

Amen