

"Broken hearts - open hearts"

Message for March 22, 2015 (read: Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-33)
Pastor Hubert Den Draak - Lent 5



"Broken hearts"

There's this story of a student went to his rabbi and said, "Why is it that the Lord says 'I will write my Law *upon* their hearts?' Shouldn't it be '*IN* their hearts'?"

"Ah," the rabbi said. "That's because the Lord understood how difficult would be for us to understand his great Word. He knew that the only way would be for us to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. So He wrote his word *ON* our hearts. It is only when our hearts break that those words can fall *INTO* our hearts, and root and grow."

When the prophet Jeremiah wrote the passage we just heard, he was facing a people who had pretty much forgotten about their God. They were in exile in Babylon, and had begun to worship alien gods. They had failed in the relationship between them and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Jeremiah could have simply said "You guys have messed up, yet again. I've warned you about it many times, but you leave God no other option but to smite you." But no, God gave him a very different message to share with these stubborn people. A message of forgiveness, of faithful love, of promise for a changed future. So *what* does Jeremiah say God's message is? To paraphrase what we just read:

"I'm going to change the ground rules in this relationship. It's time for a new agreement between us. The old one didn't work out. You got overwhelmed by rules that no longer make sense. So I'm going to keep it very simple in this new agreement. The slate is wiped clean. I'm not going to beat you over the head about your past mistakes (and believe, me there's lots of them!).

This isn't about the past, it's about the future. Why? Because I love you, and I think you love me, too, once you get to know me again. So no more rules. It will not be about rabbis and scribes teaching these many complicated rules, we're cutting out the middleman. From now on, it will be about you and me. Like a marriage, you will feel me - in your heart. "

Now *that* got the people's attention. Was this the same Jeremiah who, time after time after time, told them to obey God's rules - or else? The same Jeremiah who would work himself in a tizzy, smash pots or run around naked, screaming they had forgotten about God again?

But here he is, saying that God's message was that the old model didn't work anymore, that there needs to be a new covenant, a new agreement. From now on, God's word would be *upon* them. It would no longer be abstract rules, chiseled on stone tablets; from now on God's word will be chiseled on their hearts, as part of their identity.

But how would they feel it, how would they realize what was happening?

In the mid-80s, Tina Turner had a huge hit with the song "What's Love Got to Do With It?" In it, she tearfully sings "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" It's a great song, but I think it misses the point. Because, as the rabbi said, perhaps our hearts *have* to be broken open to fully experience what God is about. After all, it often takes a crisis to make us to stop and listen for God's word.

Jeremiah's prophecy foreshadows the bearer of the New Covenant - Jesus Christ. The evangelist John makes clear that Jesus is that Word, written on our hearts. Remember how he begins his gospel account that way: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And by the time John's gospel gets to the point of today's story, Jesus is clearly seen as be the one who brings that new covenant that Jeremiah prophesied.

But simply bringing the Word is not enough. How do we start to *feel* the love that the Word brings in our hearts? What has to happen?

Well, we now know that first our hard hearts have to be broken open.

And how are they broken? In countless different ways. To give just a few examples:

Over the next two weeks we will be reliving the story of Jesus' betrayal and death. Every time I read or hear the passion story - it breaks my heart. I see this tired and aching man, with black and blue fist marks on his face, with whip marks visible through his tattered robe, with a thin stream of blood running down the side of his face. With no one there to help him. His closest friends have betrayed him or left him behind to save their own skin. He could have chosen to not let this happen. I see him, and my heart breaks.

Stupid but powerful people ask him stupid but offensive questions. They use their religion as a weapon to eliminate those with whom they disagree or are afraid of; a sickening abuse of God's Word. I realize it, and my heart breaks.

I read the story of a homeless person getting doused with cold water and then chased away from a Tim Horton's restaurant in -25C weather, and I think of all the times that Jesus was in places where he wasn't welcome. I read it, and my heart breaks.

And when my hard heart breaks open, I feel God's word falling into it, like a kernel of wheat planted in fertile soil.

I can hear Jesus say "I will draw all people - *all* people! - to myself."

And I find new strength new and growth I didn't know was possible.

Today, Jesus tells us that he is about to do something that will break his heart, *and* our hearts. He reminds us that he does it - not because he *wants* to die, but because he realizes it is now the only option left for him. He also reminds us that he does it for one reason only - pure love for us.

Every day, we face bad news. It's on TV, on the radio, on our computer screen and in our paper. The season of Lent helps us see that news through the lens of God's love, the lens of God's coming Kingdom. A seemingly powerless Kingdom that doesn't seem to stand a chance; but in reality it is slowly taking root, like wildflowers pushing up through cracks in the pavement.

Yes, there is darkness and pain right now, and it's powerful and we should never underestimate its power. But something is about to happen to crack open that darkness. As singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen sings in one of his songs: "There's a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Christ's death and resurrection was that first crack.

So over these next two weeks, as we'll move through the darkness of Holy Week toward the light of the Resurrection, we should not be afraid to let our hearts be broken once again. Because that is how God's Word, God's love and God's grace, gets into us; this season of Lent - and well beyond.

Amen.