

## WHAT GOD HAS WRITTEN ON THE HEART

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Jeremiah 31:31-34  
John 12:20-33  
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As you may know, the Episcopal Diocese of New York has stated that this is the year of Lamentation. Which is to say, this year, congregations around the diocese are invited to consider this city's history of racial injustice, and the church's role in that history, as well as the contemporary ramifications of racism in our church, in this city, and truly, in the world. And so, this Lenten season, a small group of us at Grace Church have been reading African-American authors, and more specifically, their theological writings.

We began with a chapter from Frederick Douglass' autobiography in which he talks about the solace the slaves found in their own tight-knit church community, but how, in their greater context, it was well known that the most cruel slave owners were the white ministers. Somehow having the Bible literally in their back-pocket, they felt entitled even emboldened to treat their slaves severely. Having been a slave until he escaped and came to New York City in 1845, Frederick Douglass spoke to white crowds everywhere he went and was a significant figure in turning public opinion towards the abolition of slavery. But what weighs on my heart the most is that upon arriving here, he could not find a congregation to join which was not segregated.

Our study group also read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." It is a classic piece of American rhetoric that I imagine you all know, but by way of reminder, it was a letter that he wrote while in jail in Birmingham, Alabama, after having been arrested for a peaceful, nonviolent protest, in response to a group of white clergymen—two of whom were Episcopal bishops—who had written an open letter to the local newspaper that King was an "outsider" who was making too much trouble and these protests were untimely and rushing the people of Birmingham who would desegregate, if they wanted to, in their own time. In response to being called an "outsider" King wrote his famous line, "justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." And in response to being told that he must wait until the right time, he shared that the greatest hindrance to racial equality in the South was not the overtly racist person, but the moderate white who didn't want to upset anyone. It weighs on my heart that King felt like people like me, white, moderate, clergy, were the greatest stumbling block to his dream.

I won't go on about all the other readings, except to say that this week we're reading Toni Morrison's The Origin of Others, and in the first chapter she raises a difficult question, the white people who owned slaves, how did they *not know* that what they were doing was wrong? Was it that they truly thought what they were doing was *right*? Morrison argues that that was possible, but more likely, they refused to let their hearts be troubled by telling themselves that even if it was wrong, there was probably nothing they could do to stop it. The alternative to this, she notes, is that in order to negate the humanity of the slave standing in front of them, they had to deny their own humanity first.

In today's reading from the Old Testament, we encounter the heart of God through the voice of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is preaching to two separate groups, although to us now, all these years later, they seem like one group. But to them, at that time, they were decidedly two distinct groups. Going back as far as Kings David and Solomon there had been one unified Kingdom of Israel, made up of the descendants of the children of Israel, who were known as the "Twelve Tribes of Israel." But King Solomon's son was so corrupt that the majority of these twelve tribes rebelled against him, broke off, and became their own kingdom. They became the Northern Kingdom, and retained the name of Israel, while those who lived near Jerusalem, in the land of the tribe of Judah, became the Southern Kingdom, known as Judah. By the time the prophet Jeremiah is in the picture, these two kingdoms have been separated for centuries and denounce the other's claims to be the people of God. We look back on them now and think, "but you're all descendants of Abraham, all freed from slavery and led in the wilderness by Moses!" But to them, that is where their connection ended, and now there was nothing but animosity.

It was into this setting that the prophet preached these words, "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD."<sup>1</sup> If we believe that a miracle is divine intervention into the sphere of humanity, than this statement is about the miracle of reconciliation. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah, God says, will be reunited and build and plant together—that is, create a new home to share.

And how was God going to make this miracle of reconciliation happen? In a way that only God can: God was going to make a new covenant with them, and this time, write it on their hearts.

Jeremiah says: "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. But 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."<sup>2</sup>

This covenant that God mentions, that God gave the people after the land of Egypt, is none other than the Ten Commandments that we say together at the beginning of our services here at Grace Church during Lent. The people of Judah and Israel may have lived a long time ago, in a place far away, but their story is relatable this way: they broke the Covenant with God just I break the Covenant with God. While I have never murdered anyone, I have certainly lied. While I have never committed adultery, I have certainly envied those more fortunate than I. While I have not created for myself any graven image, I have most certainly taken the Lord's name in vain. Breaking the Covenant with God, it turns out, is a timeless, relatable state of being.

God, however, is a God of transformation, and does not leave a broken Covenant alone, but transforms the Covenant through grace. While I have lied, I have been forgiven. While I have been envious, I have been moved to gratitude. While I have taken my God for granted, I have

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 31:27-28

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 31:31-33

never been forsaken. The language that the prophet Jeremiah gives to us to consider this new Covenant, this transformation through grace, is the language of what God has written on our hearts. Following in the tradition of Israel and Judah, then, we are asked to consider, what has God written on our hearts?

To understand what this might look like, we have to consider again the situation with Israel and Judah. They were estranged from each other, and estranged from God. So when God writes a new Covenant on their hearts, it is to bring them back together, and draw them closer to God.

When God writes a new Covenant on our hearts, it is also to bring about the miracle of reconciliation with others, and draw us closer to our God.

Consider again Toni Morrison's question about the slave owners and whether or not they knew that what they were participating in was wrong (evil, in fact). She postulates that they did know that it was wrong to buy and sell other human beings, but ignored their inner voice, arguing that they couldn't possibly end the system of slavery, and so, might as well go along with it. And in doing so, by ignoring their inner conscious, died a little to themselves. In negating the humanity of the other, their humanity suffered, as well. But then there were those who came out in droves to hear Frederick Douglass speak, and, as if they were waking up to their inner conscious, became abolitionists, such that, before Douglass died, the North, and President Lincoln, went from having the goal of containing slavery in the South to abolishing it entirely throughout the whole country. Those whose hearts were changed, who wanted each person to be free, who came together and transformed the country, they were ones who knew what God had written on their hearts.

As a defining document of the Civil Rights Movement, King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was read far and wide. And, I suspect, helped countless people awaken to what God had written on their hearts. Because those who read it, who let the words sink in, began to work for racial equality and end the segregation and racist laws that plagued their communities. This kind of work is the very transformation that Covenants on the heart will make.

And when we pay attention to what God has written on our hearts, when this new Covenant guides how we live our lives, we are drawn closer to one another and to God.

In today's Gospel reading we encounter people who wanted to draw closer to God. The passage begins with "some Greeks" who were in Jerusalem and came to Jesus' disciple Philip and said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."<sup>3</sup> The Greeks were likely Roman Citizens and therefore not well liked by the Jewish community, at the very least they were decidedly "the other." But here they were, breaking boundaries, and reaching out to Jesus. We don't know, the Bible doesn't say, what they wanted or what they were going to say, only that they wanted to see Jesus. But maybe, being in Jesus' presence would have been enough.

Like these "Greeks" in today's reading, we, too, may not always understand it, but we know, like they did, that we want to see Jesus, that we want to be in the presence of all that is holy. It's this tug towards the holy that helps us begin to understand what it means when God has written

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<sup>3</sup> John 12:21b

something on our hearts. And when we pay attention to what God has written on our hearts, when we let that guide us, we not only see Jesus but become like him. After all, Jesus is what a human person looks like when they fully pay attention to what God has written on their heart.

This Lent, after reading what we're read in the study group and discussing this topic of racism in the church, I am aware that God has written on my heart that I should do something about this. I'm not sure, yet, what that will be, however, I believe that, by letting it guide me, I will participate in important work and be transformed by the experience. I will grow closer to others, and closer to God. In the midst of this transformative, reconciling work, I will have the wish fulfilled, that "wish to see Jesus."

What has God written on your heart? Where are you being drawn to transformation and reconciling relationships? Where are you being drawn closer to God? Where is it that you wish to see Jesus? These are not questions that we need to answer today, or by the end of Lent. They are questions for our whole lifetime. But we can begin today, just by considering the first question: what has God written on your heart?