

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
March 22, 2015**

Marvel at God's New Contract!

- 1. The uniqueness of the old covenant**
- 2. The perfection of the new covenant**

Hymns: "Lamb of God" – 738 – 387 – Cl: 345

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Jeremiah 31:31-34 –

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

If you're a diehard football fan, this can be a tough time of year. First of all, there's no football being played. But to top it off, many difficult contract negotiations have to be made at this time of year. Some players have contracts that have expired, and the long process of negotiating has to take place. Other players have underachieved, and the cost must be

counted whether they should be kept or cut. Strategic positions must be considered for upgrades, and players from other teams be evaluated to come in and fill those needs. Other players are demanding more money because they have produced more than expected and want a new contract. To top it all off, the NFL draft will be coming later this spring and the rookies will be thrown into the picture of positions and payment. If you're a Seahawks fan, you probably are well aware that a number of players will not be back next year.

Why bring up contracts today? Our Scripture reading from the book of Jeremiah examines our relationship with God like that of a contract. And in a surprising turn of events, the Lord tells Jeremiah that a contract negotiation of sorts will be taking place. What does this mean?

That is our task today, to examine the words of the Lord in Jeremiah 31 and **"Marvel at God's New Contract!"** Today we will examine:

- 1. The uniqueness of the old covenant**
- 2. The perfection of the new covenant**

1. The uniqueness of the old covenant

Our text begins by saying, *"The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the LORD."*

Here God clearly tells his Old Testament people through Jeremiah that the old covenant will be passing away and that a new covenant will be coming. The word "covenant" means the same as the word "testament." We refer to the two parts of our Bible with this concept that God revealed through Jeremiah (Old Testament and New Testament).

Many Christians today have been a bit confused as to how to take these two covenants. Therefore, let's start with a disclaimer. **No matter what we might talk about today with these covenants and their backgrounds,**

there was never a “different way” to be saved. That is worth repeating: no matter what we might talk about today with two covenants, there never was a “different way” to be saved.

When mankind fell into the first sin in Genesis 3, God promised the Savior, called the offspring of the woman, who would crush the serpent’s head. That first gospel promise that revealed that Jesus Christ would come into the world as our Savior was the plan of salvation. Later, when God came to Abraham in Genesis 12 and told him that the Messiah would come from his descendants and that “all nations will be blessed through you,” that same plan was still in effect. All through the Old Testament that plan was always in effect.

With that said, let’s look at what the Lord told Jeremiah about the background of the old covenant. It came about when God led his people out of slavery in Egypt. Perhaps you remember how a pharaoh arose who made the Israelites his slaves, causing God to raise up Moses to lead them back to the Promised Land. God brought about the ten terrible plagues and eventually delivered them through the Red Sea to make the journey through the wilderness back home. Here is where the old covenant came into effect. God had the nation stop at Mt. Sinai for over a year, where Moses went up the smoking, thundering mountain and received the laws of God. **Keep that in mind: Moses was the giver of the first covenant.**

God gave the nation all sorts of laws, recorded for us in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy:

- Moral laws – Laws that are always the will of God. Laws about stealing and murder, cursing and hatred. Laws about marriage and morality. Laws about idolatry and respecting God’s authorities.
- Civil laws – These laws dealt with Israel’s daily life. Included were things like:
 - Diet (no pork, no certain kinds of seafood)

- Diseases and declaration of being healthy and fit to interact with society again
- How men should cut their hair
- Limitations on contact with dead bodies
- How to weigh items at the market
- Personal injury, protection of property, and settling cases in court
- Ceremonial laws – These laws dealt with Israel’s worship life, a multitude of laws since this was a vital part of their life:
 - Who could serve as priests, and the garments the priests were to wear
 - The many sacrifices they were to offer
 - The Sabbath Day
 - The design of the tabernacle (later the Temple)
 - The calendar of festivals to hold during the year
 - Circumcision of males

And it was beautiful! These were the laws of God for his people, and the way that they could live to please him. It was a bilateral covenant, one in which God said, “I will be your God and save you” and “If you want to be my people, you will live like this and do these things.”

But we do have to ask: What was the purpose in God giving them such specific laws for that time? If you read Leviticus and Deuteronomy, there are so many of them!

1. This method of “programmed sanctification” was intended to keep them godly and dedicated to the Lord as they waited for the coming of the Messiah. It would give their life a distinct, sacred structure and constantly be in their lives. It would keep them worshiping. Paul would later write about the relationship between the two covenants when he would say in Galatians 3, “*The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by*

faith. Now that faith has come (i.e. the new covenant), we are no longer under the supervision of the law."

It's interesting that the word picture Paul uses here is one of the nanny. The law was like a nanny, to instruct and lead God's children in the earlier stages of the life of the church.

2. A second purpose of all these old covenant laws is that many of them directly foreshadowed the coming Messiah. The sacrifices had a direct connection to Christ. The priesthood foreshadowed the great High Priest to come. The Sabbath Day's rest foreshadowed the eternal rest that Christ would win. The 50th year, the Year of Jubilee, foreshadowed Christ. And many more!
3. A third purpose of this Old Testament law was that it clearly invited and portrayed God's blessings on those who followed his ways. God promised those who followed his ways possession of the land of Canaan, a fruitful wife bearing many children, prosperous crops and flocks, and much more. It could be a clear lesson to families and the nations that following the Lord was the right path to follow.
4. A final purpose was that it kept God's nation of Israel distinct from the nations around them, many of whom would be idolatrous and adversely influence Israel. We could call this purpose the "hedge."

What did the people respond when Moses laid out this covenant before them at Mt. Sinai? Exodus 19:8 recounts that they said, "*We will do everything the LORD has said.*"

However, was this covenant to be permanent? A couple things quickly tell us otherwise. First, the repeated nature of the sacrifices and the rituals that God commanded them showed that this was not his last word in covenants that he was making with them. And here in Jeremiah 31 he tells them that the old covenant will pass away because they broke it. In

fact, if you remember what the nation was doing when Moses came down from the mountain with the laws of God – worshipping the golden calf with revelry and immorality – **they broke that contract before the ink on it was dry!**

Let's pause here to ask a searching question: Would you like to live under such a contract with God? That certainly was a unique and beautiful contract! And maybe you don't have to think about it totally in terms of the lifestyle of Old Testament believers, but what about the concept? Would you like to live under a bilateral contract with God? One where your obedience and your performance is under scrutiny?

Asking this a different way, What is your "Ten Commandment history?" People often come down on the Old Testament Israelites because of their idolatry and disobedience. How is your Ten Commandment history? If we were to cycle down the list one by one and reveal your personal obedience, what would the record reveal?

- Idolatry
- Cursing
- Honoring God's Word
- Respect of authority
- Hate and murder
- Thinking and living morally
- Greed
- Gossip

How many days wouldn't your record show that you need a new contract? How many days haven't you based your decisions and actions on the question, "What's best for me?" How many times have you broken any type of bilateral covenant with the Lord? And what happens when one party breaks a contract? What happens today in the sporting world when a player breaks the terms of his contract? The owner cuts him loose in disgrace. He looks for another to take his place.

Yet what did God do?

2. The perfection of the new covenant

Our text continues, "*This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,*" declares the LORD. "*I will put my law in*

their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

In a remarkable turn of events, the Lord declares that he is going to offer a new covenant. What a covenant of GRACE this is! It is not a covenant full of laws and commands that will foreshadow coming events and that will require God's people to live a minutely programmed life of sanctification, but it will be one based on FORGIVENESS ACHIEVED. Because his people could not live up to their end of the bargain, God promises to do it all in what we call a unilateral covenant, completely one-sided and completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The first one was given through Moses, the lawgiver. This one is given through the Son of God, Jesus, who came into the world as the fulfiller of all the prophecies of the Old Testament.

In the season of Lent, how clearly we see Jesus complete this covenant of forgiveness with us. He allowed himself to be arrested and mistreated. He took our sin and guilt on himself as he suffered abuse. He became the Lamb of God as he was sacrificed for the sin of the world. He was the scapegoat that took our sins to the wilderness, never to be seen again. He was the One who died in our place on the cross of Calvary so that we could be forgiven and be called saints. He served as our Savior so that we could live forever in heaven. To show the permanence and complete fulfillment that he would win, God clearly had this all happen ONCE. No repeated sacrifices or rituals. But a perfect sacrifice made one time for all.

And now the time of the Old Testament laws of Moses are over. Of course God's moral laws are in effect until the end of time – murder, stealing, hate, immorality, these are always against God's will for living. But those daily civil and ceremonial laws have been fulfilled by Christ, so that Paul could clearly tell us in Colossians 2: *"Do not let anyone judge you by*

what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

As God's commentary on those laws, the curtain in the Temple was torn in two when Christ died. Now God's laws would be written in the heart. It would be more a desire than a keeping of the "letter." Keeping laws would not be from the perspective of "I have to," "I must," "Moses wrote it," but "I will!"

And God makes it clear that this covenant is for ALL. As we said, there is no "different way" for Old Testament people to be saved than New Testament people, but with the unique code of law that God gave the nation of Israel in the old covenant, there certainly was a "foreigner vs. Israelite" mentality that developed. Whether you were a native-born Jew or not would be quite obvious. In our New Testament, Pentecostal times that distinction sure has disappeared, and Scripture describes every nation, tribe, people, and language coming to the throne of God. Jesus sensed that time coming, as the Greeks sought him out in our Gospel reading today.

For us New Testament believers who gather today, what special comfort we have. First of all, we can't miss the comfort of the two sacraments that emphasize this covenant. Baptism clearly pictures the grace of this new covenant, as forgiveness of sins is poured out undeservedly on an individual, even an infant. And every time we celebrate communion the words of Scripture emphasize this covenant in the words of Jesus: *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."* (1 Corinthians 11:25)

A final comfort that we cannot miss today is the way that God forgives. *"I will remember their sins no more."* We think that we do such a noble service to our fellow man when we forgive him for sinning against us, but how do people normally forgive? Not by forgetting. Some might even say, "I'll forgive, but I can't forget!" How does God forgive? In Christ he

forgives completely, unconditionally, even forgetting! This is the great comfort of Lent that we see play out before our very eyes in the accounts of Christ's passion!

So do you like your new contract? It's not one that you deserved. In fact, all would say that it is one that gives you benefits and payments that are higher than you ever had coming! Yet this is the covenant that God has made with you - forgiveness and salvation in his Son. May we rejoice in this undeserved covenant and live in its grace all our lives! Amen.