

## HOW NEW IS THE NEW COVENANT?

We are in the midst of Advent: The COMING! Is anything new coming for any of you? A lot of new things came for me in 2015. I am hoping 2016 will be calm and tame and far less exciting, at least on the outside. But we are not in charge. At least we are not *supposed* to be, if we have given our lives over to the Holy Spirit. Is anything new coming for you this Advent? Or have you got everything sorted out, categorized, set firmly in its proper place ... so that even the Spirit cannot reach you?

For those of us who are Christians, The Coming of Jesus was and is the greatest change, the greatest surprise, the most upsetting and most beautiful dimensional leap that has ever occurred on our planet. We are still struggling to comprehend the magnitude of it. Most of us do not go for very many months or into very many new experiences without realizing that Jesus' Coming is a lot more dramatic than we had realized at first. Jesus' presence goes on guiding our lives and changing our realities for as long as we stay on the Path He sets before us.

But such things are shared better one-on-one or in a small Disciple Band. When we gather as a congregation, we more often stay with the larger story that all of us can know. John the Baptist announced The COMING. That is a story most of us know. It culminates in the baptism of Jesus. That is what sets everything in motion. That is what sealed it for Jesus. This is a story clearly told, though not as many people seem to know it. Around here, you know it if you *want* to know it. So this morning we will dip into Advent from a different place.

There was another Messenger who announced The COMING as profoundly and startlingly as John the Baptist. And he did so six hundred years before the Baptist was born. I consider that to be amazing, like one of the seven wonders of the spiritual world. God really does plan things out, look ahead, lay groundwork, wait patiently for the timing to be right? Sometimes that is comforting. Sometimes that makes us shudder.

People often tell me that there is a smooth transition between the Old Testament and the New Testament – the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. That there is nothing really very different or new between Christianity and Judaism – maybe just a little refinement or

possibly a little additional clarity, but it's the same God (granted) and the same context of tradition and values (partly granted). Of course, people also tell me regularly that the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament is that the Old Testament God is angry and judgmental, and the New Testament God is loving and forgiving. This is ludicrous, and a sure and certain sign that whoever is making this observation has never read either testament.

Now, I do understand that there has been much tragic animosity and persecution between Jews and Christians, something that shames the teachings and principles of both of these great religions. So maybe it is in the hope of better relations that we minimize the differences. We want it to seem like the Old Testament flows easily into the New Testament, and that over the years Judaism and Christianity have shared and competed enough back and forth that both now have the same spiritual truth and awareness.

Let us be clear: If you believe in and follow Jesus, you know that God loves Jews every bit as much as God loves Christians. And that holds good for Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and all the rest, including atheists. We are *all* the children of God. Not all of us know that, but God never forgets, and God never willingly rejects or loses *any* of the children. That is one of the things we learn and keep learning from Jesus (not that we are all happy about it). Jesus even cared about Samaritans, a thing that caused Him no end of grief in His own time and ministry. Jesus cared about and accepted half-breed Samaritans that no Jew would eat with or invite under his roof – Samaritans that Torah clearly stated were outside the Law and the Covenant. It is one of the many ways Jesus disagreed with and broke the Law – the Torah – as it was understood in His time. But I digress. First time in my life, of course.

In any case, Judaism and Christianity *are* sister religions in many ways, and everything in Christendom is rooted and grounded in Judaism. It is imperative to remember this if we are going to get serious about how new and different Jesus was, and how this drove a wedge between Judaism and Christianity that we dare not dismiss. Jesus' Death and Resurrection has had profound and endless impact on our own lives – personally and relationally. But Jesus' challenge to Judaism was also so profound and disturbing that it cost Him His life. Nor was it just a little blip at the tail end of the story. It was not a tiny little misunderstanding or last-minute failure to communicate. Jesus was in hot water – in major confrontation – with the religious authorities

and teachers of Judaism throughout His entire earthly ministry. After the Resurrection, His followers found it more and more difficult to be faithful to Jesus and participate in the Judaism of their time at the same time. Many tried to hold it together, including the Apostle Paul. But about fifty years after Jesus began His ministry, the rift was too clear and too great.

So if we think there was no dramatic, transformational, utterly astounding difference between Jesus' WAY and the Jewish WAY, then we water down The Coming of Jesus until it is so diluted that it is unrecognizable. And if that's okay, why not just stay with Judaism? Many have, wittingly and unwittingly. Many inside of Christian churches and denominations have stayed with Jewish truth and understanding, never moving very far beyond it to the incredible invitations of the Messiah. Jesus hated the rules that created distance between God and God's people. He kept breaking them on purpose, which caused part of the ire that kept growing between Him and the Jewish leaders of His time.

Do you know any churches or Christian organizations that are still trying to patch up the rules and make their members live by them, or at least make it *look* like they are living by them? I have friends who claim that most Catholics, Lutherans, Mormons, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and even many Pentecostal churches are more rules-oriented than Holy Spirit-oriented. In other words, more Jewish in approach and belief than Christian. Judaism still believes the rules will save us. Christianity does not. We have a different Savior.

This may go over a few heads, but Jesus said to a man of considerable wealth – a man with a real hang-up about his wealth, so much so that he was trusting his security to his wealth instead of to God: “*Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor ... and come, follow me.*” (Luke 18:22) How did Jesus know to say that to this man? Was it based on any law of Judaism? Not on any law I ever heard of. Perhaps “*you shall have no other gods before me*” was deep in the background. But Jesus made it personal and relational. It was an invitation for this man to join the twelve disciples and come live with Jesus until he understood who he really was and what was actually important. It had little to do with money. It had everything to do with a New WAY of Life based on a bond of trust and love. And by the way, it did not work! Jesus failed to win this man over. Nor is there any hint that Jesus tried to coerce him. Jesus put the invitation to this

man – an invitation clear and untarnished. But Jesus did not pass any miracles or threaten him or do any of the pressure/control tricks that we followers have learned to do. “If you want the New Life, come and get it. If not, your choice. No hard feelings.” When I stop to notice such things, it makes me love Jesus more and more.

Anyway, six hundred years before John the Baptist, another man announced The COMING. He was the greatest Prophet of Prayer in the Old Testament: Jeremiah. His connection to the New Testament – centuries before there *was* a New Testament – is breathtaking. It is the most eerie and profound connection in all the Scriptures, as far as I’m concerned.

So what was the situation in Jeremiah’s time? The Assyrian Empire had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and carried all the useful citizens away. It then shipped all the dregs of its own society down to Israel to intermingle with what was left of the Jews in the northern territory. That was the origin of the Samaritans we just mentioned.

But then Babylon rose to power and conquered the Assyrians. Ultimately Babylon would conquer the Southern Kingdom (Judah) and carry its citizens off to Babylon. Jeremiah saw it coming and kept warning the leaders of his time not to oppose Babylon. It would be useless and would only get a lot of people killed. Of course, for this counsel, Jeremiah was considered a traitor and accused of treason.

Babylon did exactly what Jeremiah had foretold. It turned into a major holocaust because of the resistance. Numbers are hard to be certain of the further back in history we go, but it seems probable that a higher percentage of the Jewish population was killed in the conflict with Babylon than under Hitler. A few years later, the prophet Ezekiel would ponder all the bones scattered over the hills and valleys around Jerusalem. There had been no time or manpower left even to bury the dead, and Ezekiel wept and God asked, “*Can these bones live?*” Could Israel ever come back to life? Were all of God’s promises void and canceled out? Was the Covenant on Mount Sinai for nothing? (“Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.”) Yet in a strange and seemingly ironic twist: when all of the Jewish nation was in despair, Jeremiah started preaching hope. “Now that the disaster has overtaken us, maybe we can listen again – maybe God can reach us and lead us again.”

So that was the situation. And you heard the most profound and startling of all of Jeremiah's prophecies just a few minutes ago. They are familiar words, but they seem to glance sideways off of most people. Can you imagine what they sounded like to the ears of a people who had trusted in Moses and the Covenant on Mount Sinai with profound and total conviction for generations? What kind of prayer and meditation could have brought such a prophecy into the mind of Jeremiah?

*"The days are coming, says the Lord, when I shall establish a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. [Oh my gosh! And it gets worse.] 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 ...."* [Not like the Covenant that Moses made on the Holy Mountain. Can you believe that Jeremiah would say such a thing? Can you believe he would live for more than a day or two in Jerusalem after saying such a thing? Total blasphemy! "We are going to move beyond Torah and go to something very different." Jeremiah, we surmise, lived only because the turmoil of being overrun by Babylonian armies was so great.] *"For this is the covenant I shall establish with the Israelites after those days, says the Lord: I shall set my law within them, writing it on their hearts; I shall be their God, and they will be my people."*

See any connection to Advent?

It is communion Sunday, and every time we take communion we hear Jesus' words: *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood."* What "new covenant" is Jesus referring to? Is there any other "new covenant" we know about that can fit into what Jesus is telling us? Jesus had admiration and respect for the heroes and leaders of His Jewish tradition and heritage. We keep realizing that Jesus thought about them a lot, learned from them, and transformed what He learned from them into the faith and purposes He demonstrated and lived out among us. But I suspect that Jesus had more regard for Jeremiah than for any other hero of His tradition. I think this because of the prophecy of the New Covenant – and because Jeremiah, more than any other Jewish hero, lived from a place of a personal and intimate prayer life with God. But that's just my hunch.

What I cannot escape, though I am well aware that I only comprehend parts of it, is the clear and obvious connection between the New Covenant that Jeremiah is describing and the presence of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is basing the Life of His church on. Our Resurrected Lord is the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to receive the

Holy Spirit? It means to discover that the true “Law of God” is written within you – that the Holy Spirit is the light and guide and comfort of your life. Nothing else in life is as important to you as following and obeying the Holy Spirit. And nowhere else do you find the strength, the patience, the hope, and the joy that come from this relationship that nothing on earth can supersede or steal from you.

Then suddenly it becomes clearer than ever before: This is the real secret of Jesus’ own life. His unbelievable courage and insight and focus and purpose were not coming from an outside Torah. They were coming from an inside relationship with whatever you want to name the Presence that descended upon Him at His baptism.

No man ever lived under more pressure, tension, hatred, misunderstanding, false accusations, or anger than Jesus did. Yet Jesus somehow stayed true to a light within that still astounds me, and it calls forth more honor and allegiance and wonder and love than I have toward any other being I have ever known or heard about.

“*This is the new covenant in my blood.*” How can any of us really know what that means to anybody else? I can only put a little of what it means to me into paltry and partial words. I do know that every law I have ever tried to live by has broken down in the face of real-life situations. Real people are precious beyond the precepts, and most of the time I don’t know ahead of time what would really be good for them, and often it becomes clear that they don’t even know themselves. But the love of the Holy Spirit that speaks to us from within *does not* break down. This does not mean we win, of course – sometimes the people we wish would listen most, listen least; sometimes we cannot hear clearly ourselves. But we are invited into a WAY of Life that depends upon and is dedicated to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus lived this New WAY before us – in front of us. And that is a wonder. But Jesus also *invites us* into this New WAY. That is astounding. “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood.*” Jesus would not run from the conflict, though it was carrying Him to the Cross. He would not play games with His truth, no matter what it cost. And this kind of Life is sealed in His blood. Jeremiah only announced the New Covenant; Jesus brought it to us – acted it out before us – and then invites us to open ourselves to His presence, but only after He stayed faithful to this New WAY Himself. After the Resurrection, in Pentecost, we are welcomed into this New WAY. None of the disciples got a true glimmer of the magnitude of this New WAY until after the Resurrection.

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Well, enough verbiage from a poor messenger like me, except for one comment about the usual misunderstanding. Jesus' blood is not a magic potion that works some kind of miracle which saves us, though we have no idea how or from what. Jesus' blood is what *seals* the New Covenant. That is, it proves the extent to which Jesus is willing to go to bring this New WAY of Life to us. If something is sealed in ink, that can be impressive (like a Constitution or Bill of Rights or the Bible). But if something is sealed in blood, it goes all the way. If something is sealed in blood, we can trust it – to the full extent that we trust the One whose blood has been spilled to prove it.

So we are invited into a New WAY of Life – into a New Covenant. But it still depends on how much we trust Him.