

# Fifth Sunday in Lent

## THE PROMISING COVENANT

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Michael Hoy

31The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32It 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. 33 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. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

*Author's Note: This text appears in the lectionary only on Reformation Sunday and again here, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B. Over the five weeks of Lent, most of the first lesson texts speak of covenants—with Noah, with Abraham, at Mt Sinai. Last Sunday's text has a promising covenant of sorts in the snake on the pole. This Sunday's text resumes the covenantal theme juxtaposing the old and new covenants (even if Jeremiah may not have had in mind all that we christologically added here). This reading underscores who—who ALL—gets to hear the hopeful word of promise in the new covenant.*

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## DIAGNOSIS: Old (Broken) Covenant

### **Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *A Broken People***

Let's be honest, not only about Israel and Judah, but also about ourselves. Not that they or we can hide the honest truth. Jeremiah calls them "houses" here. "Houses," not nations! Houses means that they are a people dispersed and separated by exile—an exile that they honestly deserved. There is too much evidence, not simply for Israel but for us, that we are a broken and divided people.

### **Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *A Broken Faith***

The old covenant was written in stone. And the heart is made of stone when it does not face the truth of brokenness. Few of us have the courage to say we are wrong. Everything is perceived as somehow fixable, correctable, the error of a few bad eggs. Jeremiah knew this from his own encounters with the court prophets who continued to harbor the belief that there were no yokes of bondage in exile; such yokes were to be broken as false faith in the minds of his critics (ch. 28).

### **Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Broken (and Broke) Before God***

Nonetheless, the break-up is with God. The prophet uses the language here of a broken marriage between God and the broken people. It points to the adultery (idolatry) that has been practiced for so many kingships since David; and even David had trouble with adultery. Ultimately, it is not only the "covenant that they [we] broke." It is the relationship that has dried up; the relationship in which we are running in the opposite direction from God. And God does not overlook or ignore that truth, but calls us on it.

## PROGNOSIS: New (Promised, and Promising) Covenant

### **Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Forgiven***

Still, God also speaks of a new “covenant with the house of Israel.” Notice how all are lumped together here as one house. Part and parcel of this new covenant is that God “will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.” We cannot avoid seeing how this forgiveness comes to fruition for us in the promised Son of Israel/Son of David, Jesus the Christ. On the cross, foreseen in the events leading up to the three days, is the pouring of this New Blood that cuts a new covenant with us all.

### **Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Forged on Hearts***

This new covenant is not kept distant from them, as in the days of the covenant of stone. The heart is the place where this promise is engraved. “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” It is a trust that we do not need to go out looking for. God has come to us, and instilled this new hope within us.

### **Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *For All, Restored***

All shall come to know this God and God’s promise (see the gospel pericope from John 12 for this Sunday). The pedagogy is not taught from tablets of stone, but from the promise given wholly and freely to the people. To *all* people, “from the least of these to the greatest.” Not that God can’t use promising messengers. But even the messengers can take comfort that this is God’s Spirit that is blowing in the land, to every separated and distant household; till all come to cherish the joy of our God who will not let us go from peace and mercy.