

## Sermon Archive 335

Sunday 21 March, 2021

Knox Church, Otautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Jeremiah 31: 31-34  
John 12: 20-33

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I set out in good faith, and with a whole lot of hope. There's never any guarantee, you know. There's always a risk it won't work. I knew that. But hope and "visions of how things could be" kind of encourage you on, don't they? If it's ever **going** to be, some courageous One needs to take the first risk - make that tender declaration, ask that vulnerable question.

From the sideline, of course, others are listening; and watching. You'd hope they're hoping, willing, and maybe even praying.

When it doesn't work, and finally falls over, you know that **they** (those who've been watching) have seen it. Do they say "we knew it wouldn't work?" Or maybe "what a shame it didn't work". Or maybe they come to see you, just to sit with you and let you know that time will heal. And as they do that, you won't know where to look, or what to say. You won't know what to do with the well-meant pity. It's embarrassing.

But actually that won't really matter; embarrassment is just the icing on the cake. At the real heart of this is the loss of someone you hoped might have loved you.

So you deal with it. You lick your wounds, in various ways. You cry a lot. And you learn, just quietly, that time **doesn't** heal - well, not if healing means taking it away, or cancelling it out. It's more like you move into the next chapter a little more seasoned. Maybe there's something you've learned. Maybe there's something within you that's been deepened.

Would you do it again? Would you try again?

"I would", says God.

-ooOoo-

Yes, so says God. When God says to Jeremiah "my new covenant will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors", it's followed a lived experience, between God and the people God wanted to love (and by whom God wanted to be loved) - a lived experience of things not working.

God admits, that despite all heaven's best intentions, despite the cheering on of good faith and hope, it just didn't work. And indeed, probably some were watching from the sidelines and said "we knew it would never work". The people's assessment of their former God as the failed "husband" ('they broke our covenant even though I was their husband' - says God) adds to the thing. Is there room in God for embarrassment? I don't know - but I suspect that doesn't matter - if mattering makes it the most important thing. The most important thing is the loss of the love. Oh, isn't the preacher right in this morning to the anthropomorphizing of God! Maybe - or maybe he's hoping that some kind of parallel in sacred story will shine light (maybe hope) on failed human covenant.

In other parts of the Bible, when the covenant fails, God gets angry. In Isaiah, God calls the nation "a whore" and promises to destroy it. In Ezekiel, God promises 390 days of pain. In Hosea, God promises such violent and shame-making things, I simply don't wish to describe here. But the anger and the vengeance are sharp. And sometimes, when love doesn't work, here among people, that's exactly what comes forth. Hurt, anger, lashing out.

But here, God says "it didn't work . . . so I will try again. But this time", says God, "I'll try differently. This new covenant will be different from the old one."

It's interesting, isn't it? God admits, perhaps firstly to God's own self, and now to Jeremiah (who being a prophet can be trusted to listen), that it hadn't worked. Acknowledgement, honesty, being real. The way of God is not denying - it's being real. And somewhere attached to all the being real, also perhaps is the realization that next time (if there is to be a next time) a different way will need to be found. If God were ever to try again! Ha! I wouldn't try again. You'd be a *mug* to try again. But here's the story of a God who says "I'll try again".

Why try again? Is it perhaps because the love hasn't gone away?

It seems it hasn't. So God learns, God re-groups, God finds a new way - letting slip that this new way will be about writing things not on stone, but on human hearts. That sounds risky to me. I hope that God's feeling brave!

-ooOoo-

The new way of God loving the world declares to Andrew and Philip, that the time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. A group of Greeks have asked to see Jesus, and Jesus, as God's new way of loving, of covenanting, is ready to be seen. He tells them the new way is about a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying, and in the dying, bearing much fruit. It's about those who sacrifice life, finding life, and those clinging to safety finding none. It's about following love wherever he goes. It's about being lifted up from the earth - some awful indication of the kind of death he's going to die. That's what Jesus says to those who want to see him.

Has the hurt and rejected God within him actually learned nothing from the first failure? It's a new way of expressing love, yes; but it's the same old rejection in response. ("We knew it would never work. We pity those who try. We hope he's not embarrassed" - that's what the world's about to say.) And maybe sensing something of this, Jesus says "Now my soul is troubled".

And mine is too. To break a piece of stone is one thing. To risk a human heart's another. Maybe he should pray for himself to be saved from this hour. I'm sure *I* would. But *he* says "no"; he says that this is the hour for which he's come. And then there's a clap of thunder, and it's as if God is babbling from the sky, and the people are wondering what they're hearing, and rumours run that angels are shouting and screaming, and that the ruler of the world is falling. It gets seriously strange - as Jesus' soul is troubled - as the covenant is being written on human hearts.

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I'm not sure, looking from my life, into the thick of God's second try, that love is likely to win. So, I might just step away from this "passion" thing for now. I'll find myself a safe place, from which I can muffle those cheers that come from good faith and hope. I'll nurture within my human heart the wisdom of not trying again. Or maybe I'll go the way of the anger of Hosea's God, or Isaiah's, or Ezekiel's God.

*"Since I cannot prove a lover  
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,  
I am determined to prove a villain  
And hate the idle pleasures of these days."*

I'm not sure, actually, what to do. But I think I'll steer clear of having anything written for the moment on my heart. I think that's where this Lenten season brings me - a cross, a lesson, a stepping away from the way of love.

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Meanwhile, some time on from here, beyond the cross, in the tomb, love will raise the Christ. Did we say that love has failed again? Well; the failed second-try is given life - and gives it then to others. (Those who lose life in this world will keep it for eternal life - no logic there, just the mystery of faith.) Two thousand years later, as his people gather in his name, the name of the vindicated loser, does this write love on the human heart?

I suspect that Easter - for which we wait - says something we need to hear, as we negotiate the path of failing love. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and house of Judah". The new covenant is not properly expressed until the Easter story takes its place within the story of the people of God.

If it does take its place, then at Easter maybe we once again can try again. At Easter maybe we'll be able to re-engage our human hearts. At Easter, maybe we'll risk loving again.

May it be so. The days are surely coming, says the Lord . . . I'd do it again.

A moment of quiet.