

Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year B
Jer 31:31-34
Ps 51 *passim*
Heb 5:7-9
Jn 12:20-33

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Preaching a homily is always about making choices. For one thing, you only have a limited amount of time. You can impose on the attention, patience, and endurance of the congregation only so far. You can't talk about anything and everything; you have to focus on something. If you're giving a homily (and not a sermon), your talk has to be about the lectionary readings and, if not about the readings, then about some aspect of the liturgy or the liturgical season.

Today I choose to focus on the first reading we've just heard, the one from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah preached in the 6th century before Christ, the time leading up to the Babylonian exile. The northern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel, had already fallen over a century before, and things were looking bad, very bad, for the southern kingdom, the kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah read the signs of the times and, as a prophet, he spoke on God's behalf about the coming calamity. But God let Jeremiah look beyond the two generations the Jewish people would spend in Babylon; God let Jeremiah look ahead to a better, happier time, when God would restore the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah, when God would reunite the two kingdoms as they had been united under Kings David and Solomon, and God would make *a new covenant* with the chosen people.

A covenant looks a lot like a contract, but it's more than a contract. The parties to a contract exchange goods and services, and usually their promises are *interdependent*; you bind yourself to pay some money or to do some things *only so long as* the other guy does what he says he's going to do. Not so with a covenant. A covenant is forever. A covenant is not about exchanging goods and services. With a covenant the parties give *themselves* to each other. The bride and groom tell each other, "I will be yours and you will be mine. I will belong to you and only you, as your spouse, so long as we both shall live." That's a covenant. And to be faithful to the covenant, you have to behave in certain ways. You have to follow certain rules.

It's like the game of golf. You have certain rules that every golfer knows. But more important, there are things you must learn if you're going to really play golf. The infuriating number of different, coordinated elements that make up a swing; extricating your ball from a sand trap without grounding your club; the intricacies of the short game.

The old covenant and the new covenant are identical in their terms: we heard the terms in Jeremiah: "I will be your God and you will be my people." But the old covenant was

written on tablets of stone. The new covenant that God promises to make will be planted in each one's heart. The new covenant will not be focused on the rules (important though they are), but on a relationship, on sharing in the life of God through Jesus.

At the last Supper, Jesus took the cup; he blessed it and gave it to his disciples to drink saying "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant." Any Jew who heard those words would recognize the words of God speaking through the prophet Jeremiah: "I will make a new covenant with you, and I will plant my law within you and write it upon your hearts."

Just as Jesus was lifted up upon the Cross, we lift up the Body and the Blood of Jesus at the end of the Eucharistic prayer. We seal the covenant with our great "Amen!" and again when we say "Amen!" as we receive the Bread of Life and take up the cup of salvation. Jesus gives himself to us, intimately, and we take him into our very bodies so that we can receive him in our hearts.

And at the end we go forth. We go forth because we are sent forth.

After his resurrection the risen Lord Jesus appeared to those who believed in him, off and on for a period of 40 days. On the 40th day, a Thursday, he said his last good-bye and ascended into heaven, where he reigns in glory at the right hand of the Father.

In his account of the ascension, St. Luke reports that Jesus told the apostles that with the help of the Holy Spirit they would be his witnesses beginning in Jerusalem, spreading out to Judea and Samaria, and going out from there to the very ends of the earth. He sent them forth and continues to send us forth in our day.

We always picture the ascension from the apostles' point of view. But there's a good story that is told from the perspective of the angels. As Jesus entered into heaven, the angels were overjoyed. They crowded around him. It was very exciting. In all the commotion one of the archangels asked, "Did they get it, Jesus? Do they know how much God loves them? Do they understand?" Jesus replied (or so the story goes), "Well, some of them get it. And they're going to tell others, and those others will tell still others, and eventually the entire world will understand." The angels fell silent. Finally the archangel asked, "Uh . . . , do you have a backup plan?" And Jesus said, "No, I don't need a backup plan. They won't let me down."

So, how about it, folks? Will we let him down? Or will we be his witnesses?