

“The New Deal”

Jeremiah 31:31-34 – March 29, 2009

INTRO: Hear these words from the prophet Jeremiah, or one of Jeremiah’s disciples. They tell about the people of Israel who went about repeatedly breaking the Ten Commandments. We’re reminded there was nothing wrong with the covenant made by God with those people at Sinai, but what needed to be remedied was the people’s response to that covenant.

Some of us may remember the New Deal or may have heard stories about it from our parents, or read about it in history books. On the evening of March 12, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt held his first Fireside Chat. He had a microphone, a fire lighted in the fireplace, and his dog Fala, at his feet, and used this as a way to communicate with the people in our country. Roosevelt took to the airwaves to let people know how the country was doing in the midst of the Great Depression, and millions gathered around their radios to listen to him. FDR had campaigned for president, promising a “new deal for the American people,” and he was determined to make good on that promise. His New Deal was proposed to contrast with the Old Deal, which had given them the Great Depression. And people in our country got New Deal programs such as Social Security and unemployment insurance, price supports for farmers and a minimum wage for workers, insurance for bank deposits and regulation of the stock market (*Homiletics*, April 03) Some thought it was a good New Deal, and by now there are some who think otherwise.

President Obama doesn’t have people gathered around their radios, but at their computers instead. This week, his second news conference was held, and could be accessed through a live-blog—the first live internet video chat by an American President. The White House said more than 64,000 people watched President Obama answer questions. In declaring itself “Open for Questions,” on the economy, the White House learned it must be careful what it wishes for. More than 100,000 questions were submitted. One of the top questions concerned legalizing marijuana, to stimulate the economy by allowing the government to tax and regulate the drug. The President said he didn’t think this was a good way to stimulate our economy.

Last Fall, some of Obama’s proposals for our country were compared to New Deal policies, and that term is still being applied by some, to current plans to try and help us recover from the economic crisis. And, as with FDR, some may think the programs are good, others, not so much.

Both FDR and Obama, faced a country in need of help.

Go back a couple of millennia, and you’ll find Jeremiah facing people in need of help. “He and the people of his country were now under the thumb of foreign and godless powers. Religious faith had vanished into the wind.” (*Homiletics*, April 03)

The Ten Commandments, given to those people of Israel, hadn’t made much of a difference to them—they hadn’t made their way into the hearts of the people. Those tablets of stone were the sign that a covenant, a commitment and a promise, had been made between God and the people. Each party pledged themselves to the other—that the people were bound to God and to each other, and God was bound to them.

But the stone tablets and spoken words, were just that—words that weren’t taken to heart. The people didn’t keep their end of the bargain. So, God is proposing a New Deal—a new way of covenant-making, not a new law, but a new way of knowing and keeping the promises they have made to God and God to them.

This covenant contains one of the most ancient formulas of vows: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” (which we repeated in today’s Call to Worship) And this new covenant with God won’t be written on some stone tablets that can be broken or lost or set aside, it will be written on people’s hearts. The heart was understood to be the seat of the person’s will—it was the decision-making, value-judging center. If God is now at the center of the person, they will be changed from the inside out. There will be an inner motivation and power that far surpasses something being imposed upon the person from the outside.

When people internalize God's love, it takes hold of their hearts in a way that they can't help but be different. People live in a way that is so connected to God, that it becomes second nature to them. Without thinking, we have regard for the neighbor.

On the "Super Nanny" show, quite often Jo helps the family create a list of operating principles, so they can live together in better ways. When those rules become the automatic default setting for the people in that household, people are operating in ways that care for each other. It's like when our kids say thank you or clean up their rooms without being told.

When it comes to being faithful, we may see a person who makes a decision that looks rather crazy to rational minds, but it's what they feel is their responsibility. I remember Bob Zobel, who was diagnosed with colon cancer. He went through all the cancer treatments, and had some good weeks and some tough ones. But in the midst of all that, he was bound and determined to follow through on a mission trip to Bolivia that he had been planning for the past year. You see, he had traveled in Bolivia, as a tourist. Bob had the means to travel many places and he enjoyed those trips. In Bolivia he went beyond being a tourist though and had learned to know some people that he grew to love, in a little village called Puesto Fernandez. Bob had dream that a bunch of people would go with him, some spending a week, some a couple weeks, and he would stay a month, and we would work together to rehab a day care center/orphanage, build a classroom for community classes, and build a fence around a large field that was to become the community garden. I had the privilege of spending a week on that team. And, I would look at Bob, and know that physically he felt rotten much of the time, but he just glowed because of what we were able to share with these people he had come to love. The love of God had been internalized by this man, in such a way that it was practically automatic that he would follow through on this mission trip. He believed he had a responsibility to love both God and his neighbor, as long as he could, and that was as natural to him as breathing.

This new deal God is offering through the prophet Jeremiah, is a new covenant that can help sustain people who are going to need to live through the Babylonian exile. In this time of crisis and oppression, they are reminded that God will be with them: "I will be your God and you will be my people." They can trust in God's presence to see them through, a God that will give them what they need to endure the tough times. And along with the gift of that presence, comes the responsibility of being God's people.

"The people may have assumed the covenant is about being privileged. Jeremiah claims the covenant is about being responsible. The way Jeremiah sees it, those folks are acting just like some spoiled rich kid who's doing 90 in his Mercedes And figures the world better get out of the way. He'll do just what he wants; and Daddy's prominence, Daddy's checkbook, Daddy's lawyers, will handle any difficulties. It is this attitude that drives Jeremiah to distraction. It is a travesty, a mockery of the sacred covenant. It misses the point by 180 degrees. Jeremiah knows the covenant is for responsibility—not privilege." (David Steele)

I believe FDR had an understanding of responsibility also. At the conclusion of his first fireside chat, he warned Americans: "We have provided the machinery to restore our financial system. It is up to you to support and make it work." (*Homiletics*, April 03)

No matter what we may think of the current plans for our country, there will come a point at which we will each need to be responsible for working together, to try and make changes. And perhaps the fact that God was present and outlined a covenant for those people long ago in exile, can inform us even today in a time of trouble, of how it can be in our relationship to God. We've got to remember though, that the covenant promise comes not just from God, but we need to fulfill our side, to be God's people—people who do our best to stay in love with God.

We're familiar with many kinds of covenants, commitments and promises in our lives. We make promises to be best friends forever, we make covenants when we marry or form life-long partnerships, we make promises when we share a house, join a service organization, or become members of a church. Hopefully we don't make those promises lightly.

We also need to take seriously our covenant with God, and decide if it's just a superficial thing, or if it has made its way into us, so that we are changed people. A covenant isn't to be

taken lightly. And in all the arenas where we make covenants, if they're just made in our minds, or words written on a page, or spoken aloud, the danger may be that they will never connect with our hearts because nothing has changed inside us.

Vern Jacobi had a Graham-Paige automobile agency in the 1930's. He hired a high school boy named Paul, who had a part-time job, collecting bad accounts, sweeping and vacuuming, and selling cars, too. Mr. Jacobi told Paul he could make some extra money if he sold a new "Super Charger." Paul found a prospect, Mr. Lumley, and arranged to take a new Super Charger Graham-Paige to him. In preparation for that evening of demonstrating the car and giving the sales pitch, Paul sat down with the literature and read it carefully. It would be important to explain what Graham-Paige meant by "Super Charger", so Mr. Jacobi got out a sheet of paper and some pencils; one of them had red lead. Then he drew pictures of the carburetion system and the combustion chambers. Paul followed his hand drawing and listened carefully. He took hold of the red lead pencil to trace the course of energy for internal combustion engines. He used technical words with that red pencil, far beyond Paul's understanding. Finally Mr. Jacobi quit sketching, sat back in his chair, looked at Paul carefully and said, "Something's been done to the insides, Paul. That's what makes a 'Super Charger.' Something's been done to the insides."

When something has been done to our insides, we can count on the fact that we will be different, inside out. May our relationship with God make such a difference, that not only is our commitment written on our hearts, but it shows in our lives.

--Sue Burwell