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

“The Writing on Our Heart”

I don't consider writing as one of *my* gifts but for most of my life I've been surrounded by gifted writers. My mother was a writer. After she graduated college, she worked for *Women's Day Magazine* in New York. I remember how much my mother valued the feedback and critique she received from colleagues in her writing group. The writing project she was working on just before she died was a story based on the diary entries of her paternal grandmother's faithful and flamboyant 19<sup>th</sup> century life. Other writers in the family include my brother, and brother-in-law who've both written books. My Father-in-law is a published playwright and has also written short stories and screen plays. Both of my children enjoy writing and do it for fun and competition.

We have gifted writers here in our congregation—Bob Plumb and Neil Currie have had their books published. This Wednesday at our final Wednesday evening Lenten service another gifted writer in our congregation, Cyndy Mamalian, will share with us ways that writing as a practice has helped her *Slow Down and Show Up for God*. I understand Cyndy's book will be coming out in the Fall which I'm sure will be wonderful to read.

We'll leave the writing of books, short stories, screenplays, and poetry to the professionals and those who are gifted writers. I'm not necessarily inviting us to write anything today, instead I'm inviting us to think about writing as it relates to that which is on our hearts, in the way the prophet Jeremiah phrases it.

Many of the Hebrew prophets are gifted writers and poets. Most of the writings of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah consist of poetic lamentation and harsh words of judgment, however the passage we're looking at today is a reprieve from most of what's written in the book of Jeremiah and is taken from what some refer to as the "Book of Consolation" which is a 2-chapter book within a book.

[show slide Jer. 31:33] Recall the reading we heard from Jeremiah, chapter 31 verse 33, "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel . . . : 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." . . . and then it continues at verse 34 [slide Jer. 31:34] "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."

Implicit in these verses is that concept of the law of the Lord imbedded within the covenant community. This law, the law of the Lord needs no teaching, nor does it need constant reminders for those nearby or for those on the inside, rather the law is something that's intrinsically a part of those who are considered within the covenant community. The spirit of the passage is life giving, renewing, reconciling, hope-filled as though a burden has been lifted from the community.

In Jeremiah 31:33 God through the prophet says, “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.”

I hear this passage as God (through the prophet) speaking to the people of Israel and to Israel’s descendants saying, “Listen—all you who are in earshot. I am near. You know me by my law and by my covenant. I don’t need any introduction because that formality took place a long time ago. We are beyond introductions. In addition, know that I forgive you, all of you, from the very least to the greatest. I am with you.”

That’s the message in this passage in the so-called “Book of Consolation,” this 2-chapter book of hope within a 52-chapter book of decrees of doom. God says to you and to me: these are ideas and truths that need to be written on the hearts of my followers—on your hearts. You need to hold these ideas and truths so close that you know within your very being and within your close knit community at Potomac Presbyterian Church of what I speak, which is—I am with you. Thus says the Lord.

I wonder what it looks and feels like to have God’s law or God’s covenant written on **our** hearts.

This passage raises two questions for us to ponder: [slide with question 1 on it]

1. What does it mean to have God’s law written on your heart and

[slide with question 2 on it]

2. When God's law is written on your heart what difference does that make for how you choose to live your life?

First, what does it mean to say God's law or God's covenant is written on our hearts?

Perhaps it begins with or has something to do with having a heart verse and knowing a heart verse.

I know I've shared with you all the idea and significance of what is sometimes referred to as a heart verse. A heart verse is that go-to verse of scripture that emerges in your imagination when the going gets tough or when you need to center yourself on something good, true, and hopeful. A heart verse helps to guide your thinking and comes to mind at regular intervals. You don't have to pull it out of your wallet or look it up on your phone because it's written on your heart. You know it by memory. I think of a heart verse as that verse, saying, or phrase that comes to mind to ground you in God and set you back on the path you're meant to follow.

Many people claim as a heart verse the one Pastor Chris spoke about last Sunday: John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Some of you have shared with me that Psalm 23 is your heart verse or heart Psalm shall we say. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

I’ve shared some of my heart verses with you in past sermons. I’ve got several. [slide with these verses on it]

Philippians 4:8

Proverbs 3:5-6

Romans 8:28

You and I may have different heart verses for different occasions or for different seasons of life. It may be that the verse or phrase that comes to mind and is written on our heart is that which God has given us for just such a time in which we find ourselves.

Two Wednesdays ago, Marianne Beardall shared her heart verse during the evening Lenten service when she spoke about, “awakening your desire to rest.” It was Matthew 11:28 which begins with Jesus saying, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

The first question for us to ponder is: What does it mean to have God’s law written on your heart?

Turning now to the gospel passage for today, the reading from John 12 reminds us that we have made it to the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent and are moving closer to Holy Week and Easter. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday which is the beginning of the end of Jesus' life. In John 12 Jesus speaks about when he'll be lifted up from earth and the way in which he will draw all people to himself. He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

What does Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter mean for you as we begin to ponder the events that will take place? Knowing that you and I are part of God's covenantal community and God has established that covenant with the people, with you and with me. How does that shape you, shape us, and shape our faith community?

This leads us to the second question for to ponder: What does having God's law or covenant written on our hearts mean for how we choose to live our lives today? What difference does the writing on our hearts make for how we live our lives?

One of my writer friends has the practice of writing every day. She wakes up early and just writes. It's a need, a love, a discipline, all rolled into one. She carves out time in her day for that, with intention. Maybe this week we can do that as well, not necessarily with writing but with pondering these questions concerning what's written on our heart.

I'm surrounded by writers—those who love the written word and love writing. Our ancestors in the faith have written for the ages about God, who God is, what God does and

ultimately what God in Jesus has done for us. We are moving toward the Christian climax when our faith gets tested and when our Lord gets lifted all the way up on a cross. Does this make any difference in the way you and I choose to live our lives?

Two questions to ponder this week as they relate to writing: [slide with 2 questions on it]

First, what's written on your heart?

Maybe it has something to do with having a heart verse.

Think about what that might be in this season as we move toward Holy Week and the cross.

Second, does what's written on your heart make any difference in the way you will respond to God and others this week?

We'll conclude in prayer. This prayer is attributed to St. Patrick. It's entitled The Breastplate of St. Patrick. Let's pray:

I bind myself to the power of God to hold and lead.

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me.

Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me.

Christ to comfort me and restore me, Christ beneath me.

Christ above me, Christ in the hearts of all that love me.

Christ in the mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind myself to the strong name of the Trinity. Amen