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Alexandria, VA 22310
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John 12: 20 - 33
Jeremiah 31: 31 - 34

NO TURNING BACK

I love the music at Bush Hill. Can you say “Amen!”?

And there are times when I love the music I remember as a child. A song that probably doesn't rise to the level of excellence that we share every Sunday, but one of those hymns has as the chorus, “No turning back, no turning back. I have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back.” And yet, the reality of my own faith experience, and I believe, the reality that we share, is that all too often I have turned back. I have turned my back on opportunities and responsibilities and when I reflect on that in this day and age I'm drawn to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. His country and his people are under the thumb of foreign rulers. His culture practices godless faith—a faith which relies on prowess and power. Faith which survives on who can conquer whom—whose army is the strongest? They have lost their trust that God will help them practice their faith in public.

Israel has forgotten all the times God has renewed God's covenant with them. The covenant with Abraham, to make his people numerous. The covenant with Noah, which Noah probably broke in record time. The covenant that would follow with Moses and the people who leave the land of Egypt. And the covenants one after the other leading up to the covenant in the blood of Christ, which we all take for granted so easily.

David Steele puts our forgetfulness into focus when he says, “The people assume the covenant is about being privileged. And Jeremiah reminds them that the covenant is about being responsible. The way Jeremiah sees it, these folks are acting like spoiled rich kids. You know the kind I mean. They borrow their father's Mercedes driving 90 MPH, telling the world to get out of the way. The spoiled kids who will do whatever they want, when they want. After all, Dad is a powerful person. Dad has a big fat checkbook, and if need be, Dad has lawyers to handle anything and anyone.”

Jeremiah looks at Israel's behavior, and our behavior, and sees it as a travesty—as a mockery of the covenant God has made with us over and over and over again. Now Jeremiah knows that this covenant is about responsibility, not privilege. We are living in a time when all too often our country's problems—our world's problems—are about people who have forgotten what it means to be responsible to others and to their own profession, to their God. We are living in a time when it's, now more than ever, our responsibility to live as people who rely on God's renewal of our heartfelt relationship with his son, Jesus Christ.

When the Old Testament refers to writing God's laws on our hearts, it really means writing God's word on our minds—on our understanding, on our wills for future decisions. All we need, all we want, all we hunger for is found in that right relationship with God.

And the essence of what God wants for us is best understood by reading some of those Old Testament words again, some of the words from the Psalms. If you've been preparing for Lent with your devotional materials, you've read some of those words. You've seen the songs come to life again. And if you were to take the Old Testament phrase "the Lord your God" and replace it with the name of Jesus, I believe those devotions and your Lenten experience would take on new meaning.

Start with the most famous, the call of Israel to love the Lord your God with all your heart. "Hear, O Israel, ye shall love Jesus with all your heart and all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart." Then in Deuteronomy, in the 30th chapter, we could read: "Jesus will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God (Jesus) with all your heart, and with all your soul, in order that you may live."

Jesus can only be worshiped when he is Lord of our hearts. He is already Lord of Lords and King of Kings in this world, but until he is Lord of our wills, our understanding, our minds, we cannot worship him. He is the source, yes, the only source, of life lived responsibly. Psalm 40 says "I will delight to do your will oh my God." Your law is within my heart." And we read it earlier in this service, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

In Ezekiel 36: 26–28 the Lord proclaims, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall live in the land that I give to your ancestors. Then you shall be my people, and I will be your God."

Lent preparation is quickly coming to a close. Soon we will walk with Jesus into Jerusalem and witness him being spat upon by the crowds, and his crucifixion and betrayal by even his closest friends. And I dare say, more than at any other time, we will have our hearts pricked. We will feel immense guilt and responsibility for our own crucifying blows to our Savior.

I don't want Lent to be like a January 1st New Year's Eve resolution. You know how it feels—you decide this year is going to be different. "This year I am going to achieve some of those goals for my life, for my health, that I've abused." And somewhere along about January 7th or 10th, you realize you've already fallen short—you've already failed.

Our spiritual lives often resemble something as trivial as a list of broken resolutions. We resolve to trust God and to rely on the grace of Jesus Christ. We decide we are no longer going to be those who lash out in retaliation when someone hurts us. We decide to do things that will help, such as come to church, or volunteer; or pray more, or read our Bibles more, and study and really seek to understand. And then when we fail to do what we resolve, we feel as if we've turned our backs on God again.

Jesus wants us to understand his power to help us overcome our tendency to turn away from the old way of living. Jesus will help us overcome that heart of stone that has grown more callous within our chest. Jesus will help us understand that the old way can,

indeed, be in the past and be so much more than a time of regret. It can be him resurrected in our midst. The good news goes beyond our turning back. The good news is about helping us try again. For you see, each time we try over again, God draws us closer. Not trying to do things, but trying to simply be at peace in God's presence, allowing the peace of Jesus Christ to overcome all of those memories—all that self doubt. When we experience God's promises as if they had been written on our hearts, everything changes.

So this week, as we approach Palm and Passion Sunday, and next week and the week after, when we observe Maundy Thursday, the Stations of the Cross, and finally the resurrection of our Lord, and as we read our devotions, turn to Jesus for new meaning. And when you read about your hearts, read more: read your mind. Read your understanding and your wills, and believe in the power that God has established through the covenant of His son's blood for each of us.

Don't turn back. You don't have to. Turn toward Christ, relying upon his holy spirit. And then, indeed, God will be our God and we will be God's people.

Amen.