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Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34
Sermon: Selective Amnesia
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31 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: 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. 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.

I believe it was a reporter that once asked Flannery O'Connor why so many great writers came from the South. She gave a simple response: ‘because we lost the war.’ Having to deal with loss, trauma, and the wrongs of slavery was a psychological burden whose legacy continues to this day. One of our Lenten pilgrimages in these past weeks began at Congo Square, another place of creativity and trauma where enslaved people were allowed to make their own music and recover their identity on Sundays. Part of our walk led us through Pirates Alley and Faulkner Bookstore where in the apartment above, William Faulkner completed his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay* in 1926. Many years later in the early 1960s one of my father's classmates recognized Faulkner in a New York City bar lost in his own drink. The young student marshalled up his courage to go up to the two time Pulitzer Prize winner and said: ‘Mr. Faulkner, I just wanted to tell you how much I have enjoyed your works.’ To which Faulkner replied to the young student: ‘Go to hell.’

Sometimes during flights of fancy, a young dreamer might throw out the notion to a parent about how nice it would be to be a novelist, to write the Great American Novel. And I distinctly remember being told that I had too good of a childhood to be a novelist. Whether or not that is cliché I remember reading the South Carolina writer Pat Conroy talk about the trauma of his own childhood growing up with an abusive father and Marine aviator who inflicted psychological trauma on his children to the extent that one of his children was institutionalized with mental illness, another developed schizophrenia and later committed suicide, and Pat Conroy struggled with violent memories of his father all his life and no question dealt with the trauma through his writing. His book about his father *The Great Santini*, which also became a movie starring Robert Duval, caused a great divide in the Conroy family

and protests by family members of Conroy's fictional account, not because they questioned the veracity of Conroy's depiction, but because they took offense at him for sharing 'family secrets.' Conroy readily admitted that his 'books have always been disguised voyages into that archipelago of souls known as the Conroy family.'¹

The same might be said for the prophets of the exile, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, all of whom are trying to make sense of where God is in all the dysfunction, trauma, and mess that has become of their country and faith. Our identity is often shaped by the effects of those adverse experiences. Being occupied by a powerful military machine. Losing your homeland. Or deciding that you have to leave your generational home even if it means losing everything in order to risk a better life for yourselves or your children. This past week I read an account by Jonathan Tran a Vietnamese American who teaches ethics at Baylor University who came to this country in this way: 'We had come to America at the end of the American war in Vietnam. My family was from the aristocratic North, meaning we were wealthy, landed, and elite. It also meant we were hated by the communists, and when they took control of the North it was time for us to go, which we did—first to the central mountainous area where I was born and then south to Saigon. In the spring of 1975, when it became obvious that America could not win the war, the US government enacted legislation that granted political asylum to 10,000 'Vietnamese friends of America.' In less than a month, 140,000 came.' Tran continues the pilgrimage: 'My family made it out, but not all of us. My dad was away on a business trip on the day we were evacuated out of Saigon, and Mom had to decide whether to wait for him or lose our opportunity. We left without my father.'

In addition, to losing his father, Tran lost a brother who was hit by a car and his family moved 14 times before he started high school as his mother sought to care for their family cycling between 'jobs, new dreams, lost jobs, deflated dreams, over and over again.'² It was not until his senior year of high school that Tran walked into a church where in his words 'I found a place where it is OK to be Asian American. It was the social validation that caught my attention, and God through God's church became for me the author of that validation.'

If we just read our passage today without at least a nod to the context from which it came, we could easily pass it over as a religious greeting card sentiment and nothing more. 'God will do something new...and restore your fortunes.' Perhaps something we could unwrap in a fortune cookie. I remember a colleague in seminary waxing

¹ <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2013/11/19/pat-conroy-santini>

² Jonathan Tran, 'Days of Wanting,' in *The Christian Century* (March 2024), 39-40.

eloquently about a 'Christian study group' his mentor led on Wall Street with high powered investment bankers. 'It's great,' I heard him say, 'we lead this Christian based talk at lunch for these guys and it is inspirational and motivational and then they leave and go crush it back on Wall Street.' In some ways what he was sharing was great; a ministry in the middle of downtown Manhattan to the titans of the finance industry. Maybe I was just jealous I couldn't capture that kind of spiritual congregation and audience. But there was that part of simply using the Christian message as a piece of inspirational self-help, a little motivation to go back and take the pep talk to further the goals of capitalism and 'win, win, win, no matter what, what what.'

But might the gospel of Jesus Christ ever call into question what we think is important or is it only to help us pursue it even harder? To quote the writer Anne LaMott, 'you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.' And a corollary to her observation is you can safely assume you have created God in your own image if your faith never challenges any of your behaviors, assumptions, and existing commitments. If our faith just blesses and affirms everything we believe and do, and never calls anything, not one iota into question, then is it really God we are worshipping?

Might the gospel of Jesus Christ ever push us in a counter cultural direction and say, you know, I can pursue these exponential returns my whole life or maybe I can figure out a way to use them to make an impact for the sake of Christ and the world God so loves in a different way. I am always amazed at those opportunities to take the non-interstate highways in which I will inevitably find myself stopping for gas and a cold drink in some town of 3000 where there is a Carnegie Library. My understanding is that he gave nearly his whole fortune away to build libraries near and far even in little towns in the hinterlands of the south so that everyone in this country, especially 'working classes,' might have access to books and acquire knowledge to improve their lives. In his own personal life, Carnegie struggled with some of the theology of faith, but later in life was influenced by the social gospel which believed that the gospel of Jesus Christ was not just about salvation and eternity, but about the social transformation of this whole world for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Which brings us back to our passage from Jeremiah...and this talk about a New Covenant. From the side of God, there is only one covenant and it is articulated in v. 33 of our passage: 'I will be your God; and you will be my people.' That is the primal covenant that goes back to Genesis when God creates humanity. 'I will be your God; and you will be my people.' It is a covenant grounded in freedom, the freedom of God and the freedom of humanity, it is a

covenant grounded in love, and it is a covenant grounded in relationship. It is a covenant grounded in a promise and also a telos, a goal, a future. One way or another, 'I will be your God.' And one way or another 'you will be my people.' Just remember this promise was made to people in the midst of severe trauma, loss, and adverse experiences. Their homeland had been defeated and overrun by invaders. The center of their religious life had been destroyed. And they had been taken captive to a foreign land, the land of their conquerors where they were living under house arrest. Listen to how Psalm 137 begins...'by the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' Here in this psalm worship is turned into torment and taunting by the captors. This is the context and the situation and people in captivity that Jeremiah is directing his words. People who have experienced all of this.

And the prophet continues by reminding us that this covenant will not just be written on stone tablets up on Mount Sinai, nor will they be put on stone tablets inside the ark of the covenant under lock and key in the temple, no the prophet tells us, thus says the Lord, 'I will put my law within in them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' It will change their lives. It will transform them. It will work in them and on them and through them until they reflect God's grace. Until 'I will be their God,' from the least of them to the greatest, 'and they shall be my people.'

All of us intentionally and unintentionally practice selective memory. Some of it out of sheer survival. Whether it is a move or challenging event or a transition in life or a moment of pain and suffering, we have our ways of coping, of surviving, or selectively forgetting aspects of our difficulties, challenges, and tragic events. Sometimes in healthy ways and sometimes in not so healthy ways. For instance, sometimes selective memory keeps us from talking about parts of our history or past events that are difficult or shameful or unresolved. But what happens here in Isaiah is completely different. God does not promise to practice selective memory, but selective amnesia. No matter what you might think of yourself or this world or the future or me, God says, 'I will be your God, and you will be my people.' No matter who you are, where you are on this pilgrimage of faith, and what lies behind you or ahead of you, the God of Israel makes this overarching promise that 'I will be your God, and you will be my people.' God does not ignore the trauma, God enters into the trauma. And in the midst of it all, still sees human beings worthy of love, exiles who still have a homeland, pilgrims who still have a destination and a future.

The message from the prophet ends this way, thus says the Lord: 'I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.' The passage ends not with selective memory, but with selective amnesia. God does not ignore their sin, forget their transgressions or notice the flaws, iniquities, and sins of God's people, God sees them all, knows them all, grieves over them all, but actively chooses to remember their sin no more. Not to forget it, not to dismiss it, not to gloss over it and act like it is not problematic and can be ignored. God remembers it but then chooses not to see any of God's people primarily in that light. God chooses to remember it and then remember their sin no more. God chooses to be our God even when we don't want it, think we know better or don't really need God's love or claims on our lives, and God chooses that we will be God's people even when we don't feel like it, act like it, or look like it. Even in exile, trauma, and even in all various states of godforsakenness.

I kind of want to ask Jonathan Tran, the Vietnamese American, who after 14 moves, after the loss of his father and brother and the struggles of his mother, after feeling like a second class citizen for his whole childhood, after riding the waves of geopolitical trauma and geopolitical exile, after all you experienced, how were able to ever see yourself as a child of God or God at work in any of this? Why not give up or give in or just succumb to all the injustices and grievances and resentments he is certainly entitled to carry? Through all the trauma, through all the turmoil, and tumult, he came to realize he was loved, called, claimed, and known by God, and by a God who persisted, insisted, and refused to accept him as anything less than a child of God. Just like God claimed those trauma affected exiles long ago. 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' 'For I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.'

Selective memory? No chance.

Selective amnesia? We're Getting closer.

Extravagant and Persistent Grace? Absolutely.