

We've been exploring the various covenants of the Hebrew Bible during this season of Lent. In the Noahic covenant, God promised to never again flood the Earth. In the Abrahamic covenant, God covenanted with Abraham and Sarah, offering progeny and land to the thousandth generation. At Sinai, God reminded the people of how God brought them out of Egypt; established basic ordinances; and delivered a new land of milk and honey.

Now, none of these three covenants are without their issues – portions of all three challenge our modern sensibilities; and God's universal benevolence seems to be undercut at times by God's perceived favoritism for privileged groups. But for the most part, these three covenants offer the overarching idea of a God who is vested in everybody, everything, and every time.

Today, we are introduced to a new covenant, Jeremiah's covenant, which is not only new, but it's also markedly different. Yes, the first three texts still ground me, and inform my understanding of God's nature and character. But for me, each of them speaks to what we ought to know of God, or about God. We know of God's creativity, glory, stick-to-itiveness, benevolence, etc., and so we covenant with this God. God's gonna be there for us, and we're gonna be there for God, and our mutual commitment to modeled principles will ensure this covenantal relationship.

But today, today, Jeremiah introduces us to a covenant that's not about the knowing of God, but is instead about knowing God. We're moving away from reciting God's character, exegeting God's story as if it was some algebraic equation, or a requirement before taking our college entrance exams. And we're moving toward a process whereby God is gonna be fused within us – God's law, God's story, God's very nature is going to be written on our hearts. God's gonna be our God, and we're gonna be God's people.

Elizabeth Johnson recalls that when God meets Moses at the burning bush, God "sees, hears, and knows what people are suffering." In this instance, God's knowing God's people is not just some spatial or intellectual awareness of their particular situation, but is instead a participation in what is known. That is to say, God has a felt compassion for each one of us, whether we're laboring on the deltas in Egypt or the Zoom grids of Charlotte.

To be in relationship, real, authentic relationship, whether it's with spouse, or child, or friend, or congregant, or neighbor, or even Creator, is to live with felt compassion for others. Indeed, we may be able to recite the previous three covenants from memory; we may be able to recite every provision in Leviticus; we may know every creed and catechism, we may win every sword drill or name-that-hymn-contest. But friends, if we are incapable of living with felt compassion for God and neighbor, Johnson reminds us that we will never experience the living God.

I think in Jeremiah, God finally offers a covenant that requires an intellectual, spiritual, ethical, and emotional connection between Creator and creation. Or better yet, God's people are finally able to express their lasting connection to God in a more meaningful way. And God's people are finally ready to engage in a felt compassion, knowing their Creator.

What Jeremiah's covenant allows us to understand, is that the very same God who liberated the Hebrews from Pharaoh, and who provoked and shepherded and loved our ancestors throughout the ages, and who steels them in times of exile – that very same God – is liberating us, making space for us, loving us, demonstrating felt compassion, knowing each of us, now and forever more. And even better, God is setting about to find ways for us to know God, now and forever more.

I take a look at our congregation. I see Irena, who can diagnose, demonstrate, articulate, and educate about every technical aspect of the piano she so masterfully plays. I see Melissa, who can tell me not just title, but also every word of every verse, and even the corresponding page number, of every hymn in our hymnal. I see June, who can imagine, design, and construct quilts that are not only beautiful, but also functional and sturdy. I see Howell, whose engineer's mind allows him to turn a piece of wood into furniture that is aesthetically pleasing and wholly durable. And this is to say nothing of the bakers, wordsmiths, care-givers, teachers, strategists and renaissance-people of this place.

I know that each of you has a command, a knowledge of your craft, skills, and gifts. But I also know that it is your heart-connection that illumines and

transforms the varied gifts you share. God's spirit reverberates through this place, every time I hear Irena strike the keys and Melissa sing a note, because they know their music. God's spirit reverberates every time I see the quilts that warm and snuggle my daughters at naptime, because June knew the fabric she was weaving. Every time our hand-made tables support our faithful symbols, the spirit is there, because Howell knew the wood he was crafting. And every time this room swells the fruit of your collective offerings, Sardis Baptist Church, the Spirit is present, because you know what you are giving. Sardis Baptist Church, you don't just know of God, you know God, because you engage God with felt compassion – the tangible expressions of your unique gifts. And even better, God simultaneously knows and engages each one of us!

Jonathan introduced me to a great word: Life Force. Each time we share Communion, he reminds us that Jesus told the disciples, upon pouring a glass of wine, "this is my life force, poured out for you, and it represents the new covenant." I hope it's not lost on you that this is the very same covenant we read about today.

Jesus, more than anyone we've known to date, embraced the felt compassion of his Creator, and sought to model that same felt compassion with all whom he encountered. In other words, Jesus dared to believe that the God of the Exodus knew him, too. And if God knew him, was written within in him, then Jesus could be an expression of God to others. And so Jesus invites us to a table, where those who gather are known by God, and know God, and have the opportunity to be a community, not just of word and ritual, but also of felt compassion.

In this Lenten season, we've been reminded of a God who is vested in everybody, everything, and every time. We know of this God. But friends, if we are to bring vitality into this season, we've got to make the journey from knowing of God's investment in each of our lives to knowing and experiencing God's investment in us for ourselves.

But fear not. We need not see a burning bush to know our Creator's felt compassion for us, nor to express it to our neighbors. Whether your feet are on desert sand, or plush carpet, or even hardwoods, we stand on Holy Ground, in the

**Knowing God**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Fifth Sunday of Lent, 3-21-2021**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34**



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

midst of a maker invested in and longing to know everybody and everything in every time.

Jeremiah tells us the day is coming when everyone will know the Lord. May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.