

March 22, 2015
5th Sunday in Lent, Year B
Jeremiah 31:31-34/ Psalm 51:1-13/
John 12:20-33

The Rev. Carenda Baker

I invite you to take a journey with me today. Let's call it a "grace odyssey", because it is a gift, and God has already initiated it. Like any good adventure, you can expect at least one crisis along the way – a place that holds - at one and the same time - both danger and opportunity. One possible danger could be that you realize you have come to the end of your own limited resources and can no longer go it alone. The opportunity, at that point then, will be to open yourself to receive from the abundance of grace all that God has to offer you: healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, comfort, new direction, deeper love, renewed faith. As we begin, I have one instruction for making the most of our journey together: ***Watch, and listen for the heartbeat of God.***

You probably didn't know it, but we began our grace odyssey at the start of worship today. Among our first communal acts was saying together one of the most important covenants made between God and God's people. The Decalogue we call it. I like to refer to it as "The Big 10".

The first 4 of the Big 10 teach us how we are to relate to God. The next 6 tell us how we are to relate to each other. Pretty simple really: Worship and honor God alone. Love and do right by everyone else. Simple, but NOT easy. Archbishop Desmond Tutu once asked a confirmation class he was teaching how they would summarize this covenant between God and Israel. After a few typical answers you might expect, one young teenage boy offered this most succinct 2-sentence statement: *"I saved your butts! Now go behave!"*

With the "Big 10" front and center in our minds, the 1st stop we make on our journey is to see King David. He has messed up - royally. We meet him at one of the lowest points of his life. He saw something he wanted that didn't belong to him, and he took it for himself anyway. He took another man's wife because she was pretty, and he

wanted her, and he had the power to take her. If that wasn't bad enough, the wife Bathsheba's husband Uriah, was a soldier in David's army, so David sent him to the frontline to make sure he would be killed in battle. It was David's attempt at a slick cover-up. But Nathan, the prophet, confronts David and when David finally has to look squarely at what he has done, what does he say? *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness"*, as we read in Psalm 51. Now, in Hebrew the word for lovingkindness is **hesed**. It means faithful love, committed love, like spouses have for one another.

The psalm goes on – *"In your great compassion, blot out my offenses."* Theologian Elizabeth Webb says the word translated **compassion**, is rooted in the word **rehem**, the Hebrew word for "womb". The psalm writer is calling on God's "womb love", the everflowing, eternally-connected love that a mother or father has for their child. Both those words, lovingkindness and compassion describe a love that can be counted on, rooted in, and rested in.

King David certainly wasn't alone in failing to keep the covenant of the Big 10. By the time we get to our next stop in Babylon and meet up with the prophet Jeremiah, things have fallen apart for the people of Israel. Their current king? Gone – led away in chains. The Temple? Gone- destroyed and left in rubble. Their land? Gone – taken over by an invading army. Their independence? Gone – they are now exiles living in a foreign land. All along, Jeremiah has been saying, "I warned you. I warned you to turn around and go back to God while you could. God is serious about this covenant." So surprisingly, after all the gloom and doom, in the midst of this desolate and dispirited people, Jeremiah offers them amazing words of comfort and hope. Yes, the Big 10 covenant initiated by God has failed. And God is not going to beg them any longer to turn back to Him. The people just can't seem to do it. But, says Jeremiah, God has a Plan B, a brand new and different covenant this time. This one will not be written on stone like the Big 10 given to Moses. This one will be permanently imprinted, tattooed if you will, on the inside – on their hearts, at their very center, the core of their being. Now they will never be able to forget who they are, and whose they are. Their identity will be

etched in their hearts forever. God has decided: I'm not giving up on my marriage to them. I am their God, and they are my people. We're in this together, for the long haul.

Are you picking up on the heartbeat of God yet? It's there in God's relationship with the people of Israel. It's hard to imagine a love any more intimate than married, committed love. It's hard to imagine a love that goes any deeper than the protecting love of a mother or father for their child. St. Augustine put it this way: "You have created us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." Do you hear it? It's the pulse of God's love – with us, for us, in us.

The next stop on our grace odyssey is where we meet God's Word made flesh, Jesus. Our travel narrator is the gospel writer John. At the point of today's gospel reading, tension is growing around Jesus, and people continue to be intrigued by him. But Jesus has just talked about being "glorified". That is John's coded way of saying Jesus is going to die and be raised from the dead. The urgency and intensity in John's gospel picks up. Soon, John and the other disciples will meet together for their last supper with Jesus. Reclining around the table, as was the custom in that day, John will lean back against Jesus, and hear the heartbeat of God.

Not long after that supper, John will stand at the cross with Mary, Jesus' mother. He will hear Jesus say, "Woman, here is your son." And Jesus' words to John, "Here is your mother." Jesus' breathing will slow, and become more labored and erratic. Breathing in. Breathing out. Inhale. Exhale. "It is finished", he says. And the heartbeat and the breathing stop. (PAUSE) Jesus' human heart has ceased to beat. But evil and sin, fear and death cannot kill the Source of all love.

One of the most beautiful things that we can do for each other as a community of Christ's faithful is to hold up the mirror for each other to see the very real, vibrant, pulsing, loving heartbeat of God. I'd like to share just a few snapshots from my two and a half months here with you, of where I have seen, heard and felt the heartbeat of God, the pulsing of Christ's eternal love in the life of this congregation.

1st snapshot. In February, Mother Betsy told us the story of Absalom Jones, the first African-American Episcopal priest. “K-THUNK” went the piece of chain as she dropped it on the table when telling us the story. Absalom Jones had bought his wife Mary’s freedom and his own freedom out of slavery. “K-THUNK” – and another child of God is set free to loose Christ’s love and reconciliation in the world. Evil and sin CANNOT stop love. Ever. And Betsy reminded us: We each have an active part to play in standing up for truth, justice, and right relationship with all people.

The next snapshot. In the 2nd Sunday of our Lenten series, “Out of the Dust of Grief, Light Rises”, we gathered in a space of holy listening and holy, healing tears. A love story unfolded: it started as Dave Landis showed us a photo taken of him and his wife Leslie on their wedding day, the beginning of their making a new life together. Their basket of blessings grew over time: they had 2 children; they learned to negotiate their personal differences; there was work and play and joy, and memories made to be cherished. And illness, adversity and tragic loss were mixed in with those memories, too. As Dave spoke, we heard and saw the committed love of a husband doing the hard things to care for his beloved wife, in her fragility, at home, as her health gradually declined. It was a story of keeping the promise he had made many years before to love, comfort, honor, and keep her until they were physically parted by death. *What wondrous love this is.* Deep love sheds many tears. And now? Now, small, promising buds of hope and new life are poking through the seams of Dave’s life, this faithful son of God. ***Out of the dust of grief, light rises.***

3rd snapshot. One of the most vital parts of ministry here at St. Andrew’s is, I believe, the deepening ministry of healing. I continue to be so moved by the intention and healing prayers that are generously and regularly offered here, with the tender anointing and physical touch by lay ministers and your two priests, to help bind and heal our wounds in body, mind, heart and spirit. This offering of themselves by these ministers, extends and reassures all of us of God’s power to heal and bring wholeness, and God’s desire to sustain us with Divine strength and love.

Final snapshot: On Wednesday of this past week, some of us gathered, with Deacon Janice's husband John and her sister Jeanie, around Janice's bed in the hospital. What did we do? We prayed. Some reminded Janice about precious moments lived with her. We shared the Eucharist. We held and honored deep and holy silence. We sang together: Amazing Grace; Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom; Abide with Me; Alleluia, Sing to Jesus. The 2nd stanza of that particular hymn seems so appropriate this morning: ***“Allelulia! Not as orphans are we left in sorrow now; Allelulia! He is near us, faith believes, nor questions how: though the cloud from sight received him, when the forty days were o'er, shall our hearts forget his promise, “I am with you evermore”?*** We were a small bit of the heavenly chorus, at least that's what Janice said we sounded like to her. I think her hearing was already turning toward the company of heaven and that rich, larger life of being in God's loving and holy presence forever. We gathered to sing and pray, to comfort and companion, to help send Janice forward, blessing her on her way into that eternal pulsing stream of God's love, which flows straight from the heart of God, Source of all love.

As I said at the start, it's a grace odyssey we're on, friends. The life of faith we share as Christ's disciples is a wild and unpredictable adventure in grace. There will be a share of hard days for all of us at some point, because adversity is just part of life. But especially now, with Janice's death early yesterday, at this time of loss and grief and sadness for those who knew and loved her, ***I encourage you to continue to watch and listen for the heartbeat of God.*** Always it will be revealing. Sometimes it will come and break you down, then build you up, and radically rearrange you. Some days it will surprise you, and take your breath away in wonder. Often, it will fill you with joy and possibility and new life. Steadily, it will comfort and sustain you.

Watch and listen for that loving heartbeat of God. It's as close as your own heart beat. It's as close as the hand of another reaching out to you.

Let us pray:

*“There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my life’s in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit, revives my soul again –*

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.”*

