

He did something no president of the United States had ever done. At 10 pm Eastern Standard Time, March 12, 1933, his voice came over the airwaves. With a lit fireplace crackling behind him and his dog at his feet, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a chat with America. Until that point, presidents had rarely, if ever, addressed the American people in a direct broadcast. That night Roosevelt took to the airwaves to let the people know how the country was doing in the midst of the Great Depression. The sincerity and compassion he communicated over the radio convinced many that he would give them a New Deal. Millions felt a personal relationship with an aristocratic Easterner who cared enough to speak to pajama-clad people in their living rooms. No one could have guessed how well FDR's Fireside Chats would be received, or predicted that he would deliver 30 of them over the 12 years of his presidency. This intimacy with the people would help to shape the modern presidency. One might say, FDR was making covenant with the American people in the midst of unprecedented distress. ▀

In today's lesson, we find the prophet Jeremiah having a fireside chat of his own. The tone of this chapter and the one before it is intimate, conversational. Up to this point in the book, Jeremiah has been calling the people of Israel to task. He has not lowered his voice. David Steele, writing in *Theology Today*, interprets Jeremiah this way: "His countrymen act as if the covenant with Moses is about being privileged. Jeremiah claims the covenant

is about being responsible. "The way Jeremiah sees it, those folks are acting like some spoiled rich kid who's doing 90 in the Mercedes and figures the world better get out of the way. "He'll do just what he wants. Daddy's prominence, Daddy's checkbook, Daddy's lawyers, will handle any difficulties It is this attitude, says Steele, that drives Jeremiah to distraction. "It is a travesty, a mockery of the sacred covenant. It misses the point by 180 degrees. Jeremiah knows the covenant is for responsibility ... not privilege."

Our lesson today is from Jeremiah's "Little Book of Consolation." The Little Book is a masterful weaving together of Jeremiah's negative and positive themes. This is a fireside chat. Through this well-known prophet, God is speaking warmly directly to the people, saying: **I still want a relationship with humanity.** "*They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.*" That promises an intimate relationship, if we think of the biblical meaning of "know." God is weary of waiting for reforms. It is time for something completely new. It's yet another chance at maintaining the relationship of God with the people of God. And God is giving them the means to do it. "*I will put my law within them and write my covenant on their heart.*" The law will be inherent, like the DNA code. At the time of the great kings, the law is the mark of Israel's distinctive lifestyle and its approach to worship and prayer. Yet their biblical history itself does not flatter the chosen people of Israel and Judah. They remain wanton and wayward.

They put their stock in human achievements and human institutions, like the priesthood. And by the time of prophets like Jeremiah, the priesthood has become blind and arrogant. Six centuries after Jeremiah's "Little Book," God's people are still too wrapped up in themselves to put their trust directly in God. After 500 years, by the time of Roman occupation, a particular group, the Pharisees, have internalized the priestly code of conduct and expanded it into rules for every life situation. The people still need a change of heart to accept the relationship God wants with them. But they need something more than fireside chats. So God makes a bold move: The Incarnation. God in the Flesh is born to a Hebrew couple, descendants of David. Growing up in modest fashion among the people, Jesus learns the law, and sets out on a ministry of reconciliation, first to his own ethnic people, but eventually to Gentiles, throughout Galilee and finally to Jerusalem. Through the Incarnate Christ, God boldly proclaims: I still want a relationship with humanity. *"The hour has come,"* says Jesus, *"for the Son of Man to be glorified."* The reference is to that un-glorious cruelty, the crucifixion. God will make a new covenant in Jesus' blood, a covenant with all humanity. God will redeem even the worst human cruelty. That's how much God still wants a relationship. All God asks is that you freely respond in faith, with the Cross, your heart. ■

I hear radio preachers, in the Great Revival tradition, say, "Open your hearts to Jesus. Let God into your heart." And I want to argue, it's the other way round. God is not waiting for our invitation.

The cross has inscribed Christ on human hearts. No further human act or intention persuades God to relate to humankind. The greatest act of kindness, the most fervent prayer is a matchstick compared with the roaring intensity of God's love for us. It is not a matter of opening up our hearts and letting God in. We are God's – even before our baptisms. The good news in Christ is that we do not have to earn God's love. It is freely given, as freely as Jesus gave his life on the cross. God will take the initiative to restore a right relationship with us. The Little Book proclaims to the house of Israel and the house of Judah (northern and southern kingdoms in the days of kings) that the days are coming when God will not only provide the law of righteous living, God will also provide the means of upholding that law: *"I will put my law within them and I will write it on their heart.* God will tattoo the covenant on our collective conscience. No longer will we have to teach one another to 'know the Lord' because "they all shall know me from within." As Christians, we believe that God still seeks to have a relationship with all of us. The sign of this is the Christ's resurrection. Jesus says in our gospel lesson, *When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.* Through the Spirit of the living Christ God grants humanity the grace to keep God's law, through faith in Christ. We believe that we, the body of Jesus Christ, are now commissioned as the church, to carry on that ministry to the entire world. ■

A novel approach to the Great Commission came from George Fox, a Christian in 17th century England. Fox took the command 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart' as a call to development of the human conscience. His religious movement, Quakerism, was radical – no church, no sacraments, no liturgy, no priesthood, no violence – so radical that he and his followers sought refuge in the New World, in William Penn's territory. A descendant of those hardy conscience-seekers, Mary Blackmar, describes George Fox's guiding principle as "The Inner Light." I quote from her 20th century article by that name:

"At the very center of the Quaker faith lies the doctrine of the Inner Light. Briefly stated, the principle is this: In every human soul there is implanted a certain element of God's own spirit and divine energy. The element was known to early Quakers as the *seed of Christ* or the *seed of Light*." This resembles the grain of wheat in our gospel reading from John. Blackmar continues:

"The Inner Light is twofold: First, it discerns between good and evil, revealing the presence of both in human beings. Second, it opens to human consciousness the unity of all human beings. Quakers believe that no first-hand knowledge of God is possible except through that which is experienced, or inwardly revealed to the individual, through the working of God's quickening Spirit.

"With regard to scriptures, Quakers hold that the written word arose out of the inspiration of the spirit of God in humans; therefore it is the spirit and not the word which is the final authority of truth.

"The Inner Light is a continuing revelation. "As the light has stirred prophets, saints and apostles, so the light continues to lead to further and fuller insights. Salvation, in the Quaker sense, lies in our God-given power to become children of God." ▪

In that sense, Jesus says to his followers, "*The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.*" Darkness and terror permeate human existence. Most of the world does not experience the inner light of God in Christ. If anything is tattooed on our collective heart it's not Love the Lord, but "Hate the Stranger." The PCUSA this past week approved a landmark change to the definition of marriage that takes some of the hate out of the church's relationship with gay couples. Presbyterians will need more light right now so that we can extend the hand of Christ to brothers and sisters distressed by this change. On the centennial of FDR's birth a few years ago, conservative columnist George Will wrote: "What FDR *lacked* made him great. He lacked the capacity even to imagine that things might end up badly. He had a Christian's faith that the universe is well-constituted and an American's faith that history is a rising road. "Radiating an infectious zest, he did the most important thing a president can do: He gave the nation a hopeful, and hence creative, stance toward the future." To this, I would add, Jesus died on a cross and rose again, so that humanity could have hope once again in God's love.

CONCLUSION

As children, when we wanted to assure
someone of our absolute sincerity,
we'd say, "Cross my heart and hope to die."

I propose to you that as disciples of Christ,
we should say,

"Cross my heart and hope to live."

When we recall how much God loves us,
to the point of dying on a cross,
can we offer any greater tribute
than letting God inscribe our hearts?

God seeks a relationship with us.

This is proven by the Incarnation.

God wants to forgive our sins.

We have only to confess them to God.

Christ authorized the holy meal
which we will celebrate next Sunday,
eating the broken body, drinking the cup
of the new covenant in Jesus' blood,
shed for us.

This means something, friends.

It means that we take part in the New Covenant.

We are witnesses to Christ in the world,
the world of godlessness and corruption.

The world cannot save itself.

No nation can save itself.

No individual person can save
herself or himself.

Only God can save.

Isn't it time to let God do
what God wants to do with our lives?

Let's build, let's sow, let's plant
with all our heart and hope we live.

Make the Cross your Heart. Amen.