

Lives of Prayer in the New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

October 16, 2022 – Stewardship II – Anniversary Sunday

Life presents us with hinge moments, where things pivot from one thing to another. The month of January is an annual hinge moment, as we pivot from one year to the next. Today is one of those hinge moments. It is Anniversary Sunday here at Lewinsville, and so part of today is about looking backward, celebrating our history in a particular way this year as we are concluding our 175th Anniversary year, as well as honoring those among us who have been members here at Lewinsville for 25 years and for 50 years, and longer. This is one of my favorite Sundays in the year, because this day speaks to us of steadfastness and commitment and dedication to God's mission in the community in this place. And today, we are honored to have guests with us from congregations and organizations that Lewinsville has been deeply connected to over our 175 years. Then, following the service today, folks will also have the opportunity to do a Cemetery Tour, developed and researched by Cathy Saunders, lifting up the history of our congregation, in particular the fascinating and complex history of this congregation around the Civil War and enslavement. Today is a time when we look back.

But how we look back always informs how we move forward; this is why studying history is a spiritual exercise. We look back, both to acknowledge the strengths and accomplishments of our past, and to remember the flaws and the sins of our past. In doing this, we are standing squarely in biblical tradition, as we find multiple examples throughout the Bible, in the Psalms and elsewhere, where writers are ready to acknowledge that "our ancestors have sinned, and so have we." We do this so that we can move forward with greater honesty, grounding, resilience, humility, and trust. In hinge moments, we look back to learn from what has happened before, and to apply that learning to our own lives.

Jeremiah 31 is situated at just such a hinge point, as we can see that Jeremiah is moving towards God's astonishing future, while being deeply mindful of the past. "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." It's coming!, God says. The future is coming! I've got a new future for you that will blow your mind, it will be beyond anything that you could come up with on your own. I am going to make a new covenant.

Jeremiah goes on: "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, says the Lord." Sin is a significant part of our story with God.

But the overriding point of Jeremiah 31 is that God will not let the sins of the people determine the outcome of God's story. "I will put my law within them," says the

Lord, “and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” According to Jeremiah 31, the future does not depend on people getting it right. The future is made by the grace of God, moving towards us and working for us. God says, “You all broke my covenant before, so I am going to take things into my own hands, and this time, I’m going to place my law, my Torah, within you.”

God is enacting God’s future. God is going to do it...*through us*. Which is to say, there is a crucial role for us to play. Our role, according to Luke 18, is “to pray always and not to lose heart,” not to grow weary.

Our language for that during this year at Lewinsville, is to be on a journey into the heart of God. There is so much that needs to be done in our world. There is enormous pain. There is enormous division. There is enormous violence and fear and loneliness and isolation. There is much that needs to be done.

With so much hurt in the world, there can be a temptation, especially for churches, to rush around trying to do a lot, trying to put out fires here and there and everywhere. But in all of our rushing about, we can end up getting exhausted, and then we cease to be any good to anyone.

We need to sink ourselves down into the heart of God. We need to pray always, we need to be cultivating our relationships with God, we need to be like the persistent widow in Luke 18. The text says that she *kept coming*. When we translate that into our lives of prayer, we are, in the words of 1 Thessalonians 5, “praying without ceasing.” We are placing our priority on being connected to Jesus, because, in the words of John 15, if we abide in him, if we stay connected with him, we will bear a lot of fruit. But if we disconnect from him, if we don’t prioritize our relationship with him, if we don’t devote time to being consciously in his presence, then, in the words of John 15, “apart from him, we can do nothing.” We’ll just be exhausted.

Stewardship Season is about so much more than fundraising for a budget. Stewardship is about *opening the channel* so that God’s grace flows through us and our generosity, to the world. Now, more than ever, the mission and ministry of this congregation is needed in our community, where there are so many exhausted, isolated people, where people are losing touch with each other. We want to join together to make Lewinsville’s ministry vital, compassionate, grounded, and open to God’s future. Regular participants in the life of Lewinsville should have received a pledge card in the mail this past week. If you did not, reach out to us and we will get you one. I want to encourage you to be in prayer about your pledge commitment for 2023 here. Next Sunday, October 23, is Pledge Dedication Sunday, and so by next week, we encourage you to make your pledge.

As we move forward in this hinge moment, let us ground our ministry, every part of our ministry, in the gracious and just heart of God. To God be all the glory, Amen.