

# **“Love Eternal”**

**Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33**

**Part VI of X in the Sermon Series  
“The Journey Back to Love”**

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From the Pulpit

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## “Love Eternal”

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Prayer for Illumination: Holy God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, illumine these words read and proclaimed. Silence in us any voice but your own. May we hear with joy what you have for us this day. Amen.

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One year ago in March, I remember standing here on the First Sunday we offered a livestream worship service and gathered to give thanks to God. We offered prayers for the uncertainty of what was ahead of all of us. We lifted our voices, trusting that you were lifting your voices, too. Even though in person worship was cancelled, Love wasn't cancelled, Mercy wasn't cancelled, Prayer wasn't cancelled, Hope wasn't cancelled and especially, the command to love our neighbors as Christ loved us was not cancelled either.

Through the year, we have been “apart together” and finding ways to connect and be the church in new ways.

In our Series, *Journey Back to Love* we find ourselves ever so close to Holy Week. I wonder sometimes if we ever really left the Lent of 2020. The year has proven to be a lengthy journey of discovery,

exploration, fatigue, heartache, lament, sorrow and unimaginable loss.

There has also been challenge and growth; awareness and surprise; support and understanding.

Lent is our season of honesty. It is a reality check on our lives. It is a time when we have an opportunity to break out of our illusions to face the reality of our life in preparation for Easter, when we welcome a radical new beginning.

What is the stark reality that you face? What hardship has knocked on your door this year? What challenge is present now that you never saw coming?

Our text from the prophet Jeremiah is situated in a season of failure in ancient Israel. The city of Jerusalem has been conquered and burned by the Babylonian army, the temple has been destroyed, the monarchy has been terminated, and the leading citizens deported into exile. Over a long period of time Israel refused the commandments of Sinai. Israel did not take justice seriously and did not ground its life in the God of the Exodus, thus turning away from God. And so, in covenantal perspective, came the judgment of God<sup>1</sup>.

Jeremiah tells the people that this is not the end of the story: even now, God is making the first move to restore their relationship. God promises to make a new and even better covenant with them—to forge an even more honest, open, and intimate connection with God's people. The people have sinned, yes; but God's forgiveness flows from an even deeper generosity, from the depth of God's longing to know and be known by God's people.

This is the new Covenant with God that was read earlier. The poet writes,

“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. 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.” (Jeremiah 31: 33-34).

This covenant restores the relationship between God and Israel. It offers new hope, new possibility, and life that all will know God. To know God in a new way means a readiness to treasure this relationship with God.

God’s assertion of the new covenant is one that overrides a painful truth of the previous broken covenant. The new covenant is an act of God’s inexplicable mercy and graciousness<sup>2</sup>.

What we learn the covenant God makes with Israel is that it is God’s initiative. It is God who makes the first move. The renewal of the covenant is entirely God’s action. There is no initiative from humanity. Sins are forgiven and forgotten as a way to make all things new.

God is saying I love you as my people and I will be with you forever. How deep must this love be for God to come so far for the ones God loves?

For those of us who wonder what it means to maintain a relationship with God, we have been tested over the last year. How

do I maintain my spiritual practice, my routine, my worshipful spirit when I cannot do what I usually do. Does what I do right now, in my life keep the covenant that God makes with me?

If you have concerns about your own covenantal keeping, know that God is persistent. God is relentlessly persistent to figure out how to be in relationship with us. This is a promising and hopeful word that will carry us through.

Time and time again, we falter and fail. We fall short of the support our neighbors need. When we become complacent in our practices or complicit in our silence — God will always seek us out to renew in us the covenant of love.

As Lent is our season of honesty, let's for a moment address the concerns that threaten the command to love our neighbor as Christ loves us. The threat that our Asian siblings face each and every day.

Since this time last year, 3,795 incidents were reported from all 50 states and the District of Columbia to the group Stop Asian and Pacific Islander Hate<sup>3</sup>. A Pew Research study reported 3 in 10 Asian Americans have experienced racial slurs or racist jokes since the beginning of the pandemic<sup>4</sup>. Hateful rhetoric and physical violence, mean Tweets and internet threats have continued to fracture relationships, in our own families, in our communities, targeting people's lives.

Five days ago, on March 16, 2021, outside of Atlanta, Georgia, Robert Aaron Long, killed eight people. Eight neighbors lost to this senseless act of gun violence. Six of those souls were Asian American women. Four of them were of Korean heritage. We name them here to honor their lives and hold up their memory so

that their families are not silenced and the voices of others Asian Americans are not silenced. We remember,

Soon Chung Park 박순정, Hyun Jung Grant [김]현정, Sun Cha Kim 김선자, Yong Ae Yue 유영애, Yong A Yu-eh, XiaoxiaTan 谭小洁, Daoyou Feng 冯道友, Delaina Ashley Yaun and Paul Andre Michels. All beloved children of God. Taken from families and friends too soon.

While it's been reported that the motive is unclear, it is hard to disentangle race from these killings. If we are being honest, we've seen this kind of hate before.

- We saw it in 2018, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at the Tree of Life synagogue, killing 11 people.
- We saw it again in 2016 in Orlando, Florida, at the Pulse Nightclub, killing 49 people.
- We saw it again in 2015, in Charleston South Carolina, at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, killing 9 people.

In his letter from the Birmingham Jail, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior recalls the times he would drive by the large white prominent churches in the south, asking himself “What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?”

What kind of people worship here?

I hope over time you'll help me answer this question more fully.

The kind of people to speak up and speak out against the xenophobic rhetoric, white supremacy, mysogeny and hate that fractures our communities and our country.

The kind of people who are willing to march for justice and work with local leaders to make real change for our neighbors here in this city. The type of people who will continue to work for the ways we can do better. How we can see each other more clearly? How we can honor each other more deeply? The kind of people who lead with our humanity and our hurts, our brokenness and our broken heartedness.

The kind of people who worship here, are those who stand with and stand for, and stand beside anyone who is judged, hated and even killed because of the color of their skin, their sexuality and gender identity, beliefs or background.

At the very least, that is the kind of people we hope to be. The kind of people we feel called to be.

But more pressing, is the question “Who is our God?”

Ours is a God who loves each and every one of us, just as we are. Full stop. Ours is a God who does not stand for racism or bigotry or sexism or mysogeny or hatred in any of its varied forms. Our God is a good and gracious and a Just God<sup>5</sup>.

To our Asian siblings out there who are terrified right now, to those of you who the world has given now another reason to be more scared and more alienated — you, Beloved, are not alone.

This church stands with you, we stand beside you. We see you and we love you. But most of all, God sees you and God loves you.

The Covenant that God places on our hearts is to be a God who loves beyond human understanding and yet became human, that we might come to know just how deep and how wide and all-consuming that love really is.

May we seek all the ways we can to be in relationship to God and with one another, for the sake of the world. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ferguson-and-forgiveness-jeremiah-3131-34\\_b\\_6877392](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ferguson-and-forgiveness-jeremiah-3131-34_b_6877392).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching, Year B*, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> <https://a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Experienced racial slurs or racist jokes since the beginning of the pandemic. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asian-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/>.

<sup>5</sup> The Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell, First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, CA.