

Although I entitled this message “The World We Live In,” I think it should be, “The Covenants We Make.” We need to ask ourselves by what covenants do we really live? What agreements have we made with the world? God’s world? Another world? The message is based on Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-26.

It has been quite a week. As the snows piled up on Tuesday and into Wednesday, I found myself wanting to talk back to the weather forecasters on our local television channels. They were frustrating me, but perhaps not for the reason you think. Every time they began a forecast they apologized, promising all would eventually get better. The news anchors would corroborate the narrative: “Oh,” they would say, “we don’t deserve this, bring us spring!” They’d go out in the field, in Bangor or Portland, talking to people, beginning with “Are you sick and tired of this?” Most of whom took their cue and said “Yes, yes I am.” This began to get under my skin.

Perhaps this Lent has been working on me. Constructing the services week after week with the planning team, we focused on ways human beings have interacted with the created world – removing ourselves from it, setting ourselves above it, using it not always for benevolent purposes. So hearing people talking about the weather as if it was an enemy got to me. Our mindset as human beings is such that **our** purposes, **our** agendas, **our** schedules are more pressing and important than the purposes and schedules of nature. Within which it snows in March in Maine! Sometimes even in April. Now I know I am making these comments from a privileged place where I didn’t have to suffer the worst consequences of the weather – I had heat, a home, enough food, and company with whom to ride out the storm. However, it seems to me the weather is not the enemy as much as the human arrangements we make in which not everyone has those things. These deserve our ire more than the Nor’easter. We, children of the earth, seem to work against the weather, not with it.

You might ask “Is there a scriptural point to this?” Well, actually, there is. In today’s gospel, people are often baffled when Jesus says: “...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it

dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” This teaching is impossible to understand unless we know what the author means when he uses the phrase “this world.” “Those who hate their life in **this world.**” Jesus is not talking about the God-created world here. Creation is to be revered and respected. In his gospel, John uses this term to mean anything that is “organized in **opposition to God’s purposes.**” Commentator Charles L. Campbell (*Feasting on the Word*) says that this world, the one in opposition to God’s ways, “seeks to hold human beings captive to its ways.”

In the time I had this week, freed up a bit by the driveway I could not get out of, I began to think about the world we live in. Is it organized “in opposition” to God’s purposes or is it aligned? And how do we find ourselves in one or the other world? How do we know what the intentions of God really are? My first thought was that this is complex in our day and time. We are fed **so many narratives**, so many stories, about how this life and world is supposed to be organized. The unending reports about the demon storm are a mild example of how we can easily get caught in a narrative that shapes our moods, reactions, and attention. I confess, I was drawn in and spent way too much time watching a weather map and tracking snow amounts. But why? What good did it do?

There are many less innocuous examples of how our mindsets are shaped and aligned to the prevalent narratives of our time. Take the stock market, for example, the Dow Jones. I have known people who live watching the movements of the market. Their mood, their day, their satisfaction with life depended upon a few ticks up or down. But do you know that the Dow tracks only a very small portion of stocks traded? I did not, until I was told this by someone who understands these things. Yet we have made it a part of the daily reckoning of how

the country is doing based on this relatively small economic indicator. Even NPR gives the daily report with appropriate music included to accentuate the mood!

Another example: My mother used to call herself a news hound. She had news on 24/7...and I mean that. She slept with the radio on. Her days were shaped by the anxieties, the traumas, the stories deemed by the news outlets as important enough to repeat over and over and over again. It was as if she had made a **covenant** with the broadcasters, one in particular, agreeing to let her life be aligned with its intents and purposes.

Yes, our time and technology offers us many narratives by which to live. One of the reasons we are in such turmoil in the United States right now is that some of our most sacred storylines about ourselves are showing some deep cracks. Our open-armed welcome to immigrants, our firm belief in equal opportunity, even our understanding of ourselves as a true democracy, all of these are being crushed under the weight of partisan hatred, out in the open racism, and the undeniable role of money in the workings of government.

Many of our older generations thought of our country as being **aligned** with the purposes of the Christian God. The flag was put in our churches for this very reason. We saw ourselves as the conscience of the world! Can we really presume to say that anymore? Or need we **die to that image of ourselves** before something new and good can begin to grow? Before we can again bear much fruit? This would certainly align us with the Christian narrative. Death always precedes life. I love this country. But I think some things need to die before we rise again. Hubris must give way to humility and denial must fall to the earth and seed instead a piercing honesty.

Jesus calls us to hate our lives in this world, in other words, **to hate any part of life that is in opposition to God**. Again, I ask, how do we know what is aligned with God and what is not? In our Hebrew Scriptures reading, God says through Jeremiah: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts,

and I will be their God and they will 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."

In the scriptures, over and over again God initiates a covenant with us...through Abram and Moses and various prophets, and of course, Jesus. But over and over again, we make new agreements, even unconsciously, by which we live. We have embraced idol after idol shifting our allegiance away from God. But, you know, **there's that heart thing**. God's law has been written deep inside our hearts. There is a part of all of us that knows that love is really at the core of who we are. The covenant we have with God written in the center of our being is a covenant of love – for God, for creation, for each other, for ourselves. Love is what we are about which is why we are so unsettled when we try to live by any other measure, any other story, under any other covenant.

Living by love is not easy, particularly in a world that give us so many seemingly attractive options. But they do not ask us to die to our illusions. They do not ask us to give so fully of ourselves. They are often organized in opposition to the purposes of God, written at our core. So, how do we know if we are aligned with God? Be still. Be open. Be vulnerable. The law written on your heart will speak. It will show the way. Amen.

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