



Roanoke, Virginia

October 16, 2022

## ***“Covenant Hearts”***

*Jeremiah 31:31-34*

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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 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, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with them, and I will write 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 one another, “Know the Lord,” for they shall 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.

In his *Homiletical Perspective Essay* on this passage, Dr. W. Hulitt Gloer begins with...

Into the darkest night of the life of Israel and Judah comes the brightest light. Ripped from their holy homeland, forbidden access to their sacred temple by both physical location and its destruction, they surely thought their God had abandoned them or, worse still, had been defeated. Into that anguish came Jeremiah’s letter instructing them to put down roots in Babylon, build houses and set up shops, seek the welfare of Babylon, and pray for their captors! (29:4-7).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. w. Hulitt Gloer, from “Homiletical Perspective” on Jeremiah 31:27-34, Proper 24, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 4.



God's people, conquered, captured, sent away, and now in a foreign land they are called to settle in, set up shop, be and live. "Stuck in Babylon and told to carry on. Where is the good news, the promise for a better tomorrow?" Where is the promise of a brighter tomorrow to provide hope for the darkness of their current day?

Gloer continues: "It is a familiar pattern in history. Dark times come. In personal and corporate lives there seems to be little if any hope. Then, into the darkness a voice speaks out, a voice speaks with news as unforeseen as was the news that sent us into the darkness. This voice of hope suggests that there is light, no matter how deep our darkness may seem."<sup>2</sup>

Into the darkness God is speaking. From the darkness the light of hope glimmers, if only we see it faintly, forcing us to seek it out and respond.

And in the darkness of exile, in the darkness of generational trauma, generational blame that made the people point fingers saying, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Into this generational darkness, Jeremiah lights a candle of hope, a bright light that will roll back the exile's darkness.

The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with both the house of Israel and Judah. This new covenant will not be like the one of old, the one I made with the generations before you—when I took them by the hand and brought them out of Egypt—a covenant that they broke. They broke that covenant even though I was their husband, who loved them and cared for them. But this covenant, this new covenant, I will write it on their hearts, they will know me intimately; I will be their God and they will be my people. We will belong to each other. They will all know me, from the least to the greatest, and we all will deeply know one another. Forgiveness will be theirs. I will give them peace from their sin.

God's words from the mouth of Jeremiah assures the people that God has not abandoned them, in spite of their disobedience; this is unbelievable good news. No longer is their guilt to remain a burden they must carry. God removes the heavy burden in this new covenant. A covenant of healing. A covenant of restoration.

*God is a God of relationship, and God seeks to restore relationship with God's people.*

From darkness and hopelessness, God brings a light of hope. The hope Jeremiah envisioned includes both a physical restoration and a spiritual one. Going beyond anything the community could have ever imagined, this restoration would be a healing of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



the relationship between God and the entire people, to include everyone, a collective, yet personal restoration, from the least to the greatest.<sup>3</sup> A restoration that would bring transformation.

As familiar as a pattern as this in history, this story pattern is also familiar in pop-culture and movies, in particular Disney movies. Have you seen *Encanto* yet?

If you have not seen it, I highly recommend it. It is not a Disney movie that has in its center a romantic love story, much of Disney's new works do not. They tend to address deeper themes and heavier aspects of life. *Encanto* is a wonderful story of family, a story of the blessings and curses family brings, but a great story of restoration, transformation, and in it there is a major theme of generational trauma and its effect on family.

*Encanto* is the story of the family Madrigal. And the origin of their story is a terrible trauma. It begins with young Pedro and Alma; they meet, fall in love, and start a family, welcoming triplets into the world. But a revolution forces them to leave their home and seek refuge in the surrounding hills of Colombia. During their escape they cross a river, and as armed forces are bearing down on them, Pedro sacrifices himself to save his wife Alma and their 3 children. That traumatic event defines the rest of Alma's life. Following Pedro's sacrifice, the candle Alma is carrying becomes magical and protects the family in a hidden and magical valley named Encanto, meaning enchanted. The magic provides their 3 children with magical gifts. Years go by, a village grows, and the magic pours forth from their house *Casita*. Alma's children have children, and each child in the family Madrigal is gifted a superhuman power, all but one, Maribel. As the story continues the magic begins to fade and Uncle Bruno, who we don't talk about, No No No, who was given the gift of prophecy, foretells a future where the family could lose the magic and his vision places Maribel at the center of the possible loss. Hearing of this vision, Abuela Alma does all she can to hold on to the magic that she once knew and hold on to her family, a family that we begin to see throughout the movie is not in fact all that whole. Abuela Alma says at a family party, "Everything is fine! The magic is strong, and the drinks are too!" But the magic does fade, their superhuman gifts weaken, and their house *Casita* eventual cracks until it falls to the ground.

The story of *Encanto* is the story of a daughter and granddaughter whose journey takes her into a deeper relationship with her family, especially the broken ones. Furthermore, this narrative arc models a countercultural belief in the possibility of real forgiveness and transformational reconciliation—even in the face of serious loss and wrongdoing.

Transformation is what the story of *Encanto* points to.

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<sup>3</sup> Alphonetta Wines, "Commentary on Jeremiah 31:27-34" published by *Working Preacher*, Oct. 16, 2016. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-3127-34-2>



On the same riverbank that Abuela Alma lost Pedro and the magic was first gifted, the gift of reconciliation is found. Abuela apologizes to Maribel: “I was given a miracle, a second chance. And I was afraid to lose it. I lost sight of who the miracle was for.”

Seeing her grandmother in a new light, Maribel, with empathy born from understanding her grandmother’s suffering, offers her own apology.

And as all that is unfolding a song in Spanish is playing in the background, and even if you can’t speak Spanish I bet you tears fall from your eyes as they did mine. The song is called *Dos Oruguitas*, Two Caterpillars, and tells of the family love story of Alma and Pedro. Cocooned and waiting, the song speaks to the caterpillar’s fear of change in a world that is constantly changing, a change they too must experience. As the song goes on, the scene jumps back to Abuela Alma and Maribel and the chorus changes. “Ay, mariposas” (butterflies), transformation is upon them, relationship deepens...

*Ay, mariposas*  
*Don't you hold on too tight*  
*Both of you know*  
*It's your time to go*  
*To fly apart, to reunite*  
*Wonders surround you*  
*Just let the walls come down*  
*Don't look behind you*  
*Fly till you find*  
*Your way toward tomorrow.*<sup>4</sup>

Abuela Alma and Maribel, and the entire Madrigal family’s relationship with their magic and with one another has been transformed. They have become a closer family, showing each other their weakness in their strength, really becoming who they are, their true and authentic selves. They know one another on a deeper level. Their relationship has been transformed.

In the face of constant wrongdoing and generational disobedience that pushed Israel and Judah further from God, and God further from them in their mind, the remarkable gift of forgiveness and reconciliation was waiting. God’s amazing grace was waiting there, calling them back to their home as a transformed community. God initiates the transformation: “I will make a new covenant,” “I will put my law within them,” “I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God.” The promises here are a witness to God’s never-ending love and grace. And the promise is

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<sup>4</sup> *Dos Oruguitas* by Sebastian Yatra, in the movie *Encanto*. 2021: Disney.



fulfilled when God's promised Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." This promise went into the depths of darkness, the darkness of death, and transformed the world! It is Jesus who embodied this new covenant: 'then he took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood, pour out for the forgiveness of sin."

God has gifted the miracle of life and promised new life in Christ. And this promise is for us all. This promise is for you, and for me, and for the work and witness of this church together, as a transformed community!

In the final scene of Encanto, the family and village join in rebuilding their house Casita, and the song points to the gifted miracle, which is not any superhuman power, but to the gift itself which is each of them: "*The miracle is you, not some gift, just you.... All of you*"

Today is commitment Sunday, when we offer our gifts to the church, a financial pledge, a new covenant for the coming year. The work of God is transformation. The work and ministry of Jesus Christ is transformation. The Spirit is alive in and through us to continue the work of transformation in the world.

I have witnessed transformation here in this church during Vacation Bible School, Men's Bible Study, youth group, kid's fellowship, in the preschool, and in Sunday School.

I have witnessed transformation in the hearts of people welcomed by this church through Family Promise, through the work of the Presbyterian Community Center, RAM House, and Habitat for Humanity.

I have witnessed transformation in the hearts of our youth and adults in San Juan de la Maguana, at Montreat Youth Conference, and at the Churchwide Trent Getaway. And I know you have your own stories of transformation!!

Through your pledge and commitment, you join in the transformational work and ministry of this church.

During the last hymn, you will be invited to offer our promised gifts in gratitude for God's grace. Beloved, as you come forward, or as you continue to discern what gifts you have to offer, remember this: God loves you. God has forgiven you, and in Jesus Christ life is restored. We have been transformed by the gift of God's grace. God seeks to be in relationship with you. Know that your financial gift is not the miracle, the miracle and the gift is YOU. You are the gift, each and every one of you.

For the new covenant is written on your heart, claiming you as a beloved child of God, in this generation and for eternity.

To God be the Glory, now and forever. Amen.

