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Jeremiah 31:31–34 ESV

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares 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. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Ezekiel 35:1–9 ESV, edited for brevity.

35 The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, set your face against Mount Seir, and prophesy against it, ³ and say to it, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I am against you, Mount Seir, and I will stretch out my hand against you, and I will make you a desolation and a waste. ⁴ I will lay your cities waste, and you shall become a desolation, and you shall know that I am the LORD. ⁵ Because you cherished perpetual enmity and gave over the people of Israel to the power of the sword at the time of their calamity, at the time of their final punishment, ⁶ therefore, as I live, declares the Lord GOD, I will make Mount Seir a waste and a desolation, and I will cut off from it all who come and go. ⁸ And I will fill its mountains with the slain. On your hills and in your valleys and in all your ravines those slain with the sword shall fall. ⁹ I will make you a perpetual desolation, and your cities shall not be inhabited. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

Matthew 25:41-46 ESV

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did

not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Laying our cities to waste.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. We continue to anticipate the birth of Jesus. Last week, we did this by looking at the next arrival of Jesus, the Parousia – which, as we learned, is somewhat incorrectly interpreted by modern Christians as meaning the “Second Coming”. What I’d like to do today is look at a tough question, one that we tend to ignore in the Christian world today. We don’t talk much about God punishing people; instead, we focus on God’s love and forgiveness. But it’s not true that with the end of the Old Covenant came the end of God’s willingness to deal brutally with evil. As a review, we have, in the past, contrasted the Old and the New Covenant, noting that under the New Covenant, we no longer have to worry about following a pile of rules in order to earn the Old Testament promises of 1) God’s blessing, 2) progeny (or offspring), and 3) land to live on. Instead, through unearned grace, we enjoy the blessing of living in total forgiveness. But this doesn’t mean that evil gets a free ride. In the Old Testament, God would deal harshly with those who broke the Old Covenant. But

what would God do today to people who break the New Covenant? In truth, many say that the New Covenant is unbreakable, because as long as we have faith, we cannot lose that promise of forgiveness. God will not cast us aside. But – what about people who break it in the sense that they claim to be believers, to have faith, but don't actually live the way Christ taught us to live? We are saved from punishment by faith – but not by false faith.

Let's step back and look at this distinction between the Old and the New Covenants, by looking at the text of the *Old* Testament. We'll use this to focus on how God treats those who do not live by God's laws. Consider the New Covenant and our first passage today. What a lot of people don't realize is that the New Covenant was prophesized repeatedly in the Old Testament. Consider our first passage for today. In it, the Prophet Jeremiah is speaking: ³¹ *"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke.³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."* This says that we will cast aside

the need to constantly berate each other, making sure that we do not turn our backs on God – because we will intuitively know God and feel God’s presence. We will also have our sins forgiven and live in joy. This is why we are excited during Advent: we are anticipating the arrival of the Messiah, with the New Covenant in hand, the fulfillment of an eons-old promise of God. And, indeed, the New Covenant brings the promise of forgiveness.

Jeremiah was one of the Old Testament prophets, someone who spoke for God, who warned people when God was angry with them for breaking the Old Covenant, but who also gave God’s people hope that their close relationship with God would one day be renewed. This is a common pattern with the prophets, words of warning early in a Book of prophesy, followed by words of hope and reassurance that the people would return to God and that Israel itself would be renewed as a free nation. This pattern holds true in Ezekiel, as well, the Book from which we get our second reading today. This quote comes late in Ezekiel, where he has turned from condemning his fellow Israelites and is now predicting that something wonderful will happen. We’ve looked at Ezekiel before. He was caught up as a young man in the forced exile from Israel to Babylon. He had been studying to be a Temple priest in Jerusalem; instead, God used him as a prophet in a faraway land where he and thousands of others were being held prisoners. In

our passage, Ezekiel is saying that the enemies of God's people will be defeated, and the Israelites will return to Israel. Mount Seir in our passage refers to red sandstone mountains that were in the land of Edom, and so this passage is about the people called the Edomites. They had benefited when Babylon conquered Israel by taking some of the Israelites' land. They did this by being complicit in the fall of Israel. Now, Ezekiel, speaks for God: *I will make Mount Edom a waste and a desolation, and I will cut off from it all who come and go. I will fill its mountains with the slain. On your hills and in your valleys and in all your ravines those slain with the sword shall fall. ⁹ I will make you a perpetual desolation, and your cities shall not be inhabited. Then you will know that I am the LORD.* Once the Israelites return to God and renew their covenant, the land of Edom will fall - and the Israelites will get their homeland back. That's the flip side of the Old Covenant: when God's people live according to the Covenant, God's wrath is turned on the enemies of Israel. God, in this case, will empty out their cities, lay them to waste.

We see that in the Old Testament, God tended to deal brutally with whomever was defying God. But even in Old Testament times, God promised to one day break that pattern and bring a newer, gentler covenant. Does this mean that everyone now gets a free ride? We live in forgiveness and we assume that God will punish people only spiritually, that they will suffer from the loss of his

presence, rather than the loss of human life or through suffering here on earth.

Today, God doesn't throw anyone into "perpetual desolation". But is that true?

Let's get back to our Ezekiel passage. Wendy and I just took a trip to Portugal. I'm part Portuguese, as it turns out. We started in a major coastal city, Porto. Then we moved inland, toward the rural areas where people have, for many hundreds of years, grown grapes, olives and cork trees. Making wine and olive oil, and harvesting cork, are three of the major, traditional industries of Portugal. But what's intriguing is that Portugal has a problem that is shared by much of the developed world, including the United States. As we traveled and talked to people, we heard the same story over and over, and that was how people didn't want to do the hard work of harvesting grapes, olives, and cork anymore. They move to metropolitan areas for lives filled with luxuries. Many Portuguese people move to other parts of the European Union and get office jobs that pay far better than jobs in Portugal and don't require that they work in the hot sun. As a result, we passed city after city, village after village, filled with abandoned houses. Once beautiful structures that sit on hillsides with stunning views, and that used to be homes that housed multiple generations of people, are now in decay. Their roofs are collapsing, the windows are missing, the grounds

around them are overgrown with brush. They are blackened and empty. The population of Portugal is decreasing sharply. Cities are being laid to waste.

I'm not equating the abandonment of faith with the emptying out of so many communities in the western world. I'm not suggesting that the people of Portugal are inherently more sinful or less faithful than people who live in countries whose populations continue to increase, like the U.S. We can understand why certain industries are no longer so attractive, and why cities that once thrived through these industries are now losing people. As manufacturing has lost ground in the U.S., Detroit has been emptying out, leaving something on the order of a hundred thousand empty homes. Times change, tasks that were once manual become automated. People watch TV and surf the Internet, and dream of lives that are very different from those of their ancestors. This is indeed a global phenomenon. It's happening in China. In India. In Japan. In Africa.

I do wonder, however, how many of those people living in incredibly congested cities like Porto and Lisbon are happier than their ancestors. How many people struggling to pay massive rents in California are truly happier than people, a few decades ago, who made cars in Detroit? Is being packed into a tiny apartment above a noisy, polluted street, instead of getting up each morning with a view of God's magnificent countryside truly better? I think it has to do with

being sold something flashy and exciting by the media. I think there is a chilling point to be made in our second passage for today. As we grow to love consumer-oriented lives where we put incredible value on Amazon delivering digital gadgets and other consumer goods in under 24 hours, we are indeed turning away from the modest lives that Jesus taught us to live. We are indeed laying our communities to waste, letting them become desolate. God isn't punishing us. We're punishing us. This is much in the spirit of the Old Testament, actually. God let the Israelites harm themselves over and over, by abandoning their covenant, and getting involved in wars which they lost.

Wendy and I went on an outing to an area on the banks of the Douro, a major river in Portugal. There's a picture of it on the front of your bulletin. You can see the fall colors of the grape vines. It's an area that's barely inhabited today. Our guide was a young man who told us about his brothers, sisters, cousins. They were in Lisbon, Porto, Paris, Canada, the United States. All of them had abandoned the world of grapes, olive trees, and cork. They were scattered to the wind. He was not excited about this. He missed his family. He missed the security he had as a child. He was lost. His home city had been laid waste.

Consider our third passage, which is from the New Testament, from the Gospel of Matthew. In it, Jesus is speaking and he's making it clear that evil does

not get a free ride in the New Covenant. There is still a penalty to be paid by those who refuse to live in modesty, and with generosity and empathy for others. Jesus expresses special anger toward those who think they are better than other people. Jesus says: *'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'* ⁴⁶ *And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

Let's not forget that our faith - while it isn't brought to our doorsteps in under 24 hours by Amazon - it is what makes us children of God. I don't know if people will ever become disillusioned with consumerism and lives where we live with our fingers and our minds, instead of with our bodies and our minds. It's true that the New Covenant does indeed offer forgiveness and unearned grace. But, while on one hand, I do believe that God doesn't tolerate hypocrites who only pretend to have faith, I think that what's really true is that we make our own problems. Instead of living humble lives where we value family, our connection to God, and the fulfillment we feel when we help others, we are drawn into the world of Amazon, of flashy gratification. As we await the arrival of Jesus this Advent season, we mustn't forget that by modeling our earthly lives after Jesus' earthly life, we can keep our cities from being laid to waste, if not physically, then at least spiritually. Amen.