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**A New Heart – Jeremiah 31: 31-34**

I don't know about you, but it's hard for me to hear the news these days. Sure, there're lots of good things going on – but the overall picture can seem pretty bleak. Sometimes it can take a real effort to be upbeat – and, for far too many, even myself at times, a real effort to get into the Christmas spirit.

Part of that, of course, is how the “Christmas spirit” is packaged in our culture. But I don't want to take potshots at “Christmas in America” this morning, first of all because you've heard all that whining for decades, and second, I'd rather not dignify it by giving it the attention.

The heart of Christmas is, not surprisingly, Jesus Christ. We've all heard the slogans: “Keep Christ in Christmas,” “Jesus is the reason for the season,” and all that; but if you're here today, you're here for more than just slogan-fulfillment.

You're here because of Jesus Christ, who he is, and this season is about just that. It's the lead-up to celebrating the birth of our savior.

Part of that lead-up, for people of faith, is taking time to recall and savor the richness and complexity of God's plan in giving us the gift of

atonement in Jesus Christ. Atonement? Atonement is, I know, a churchy-word; but it's easy to remember if you think of it by syllables: "at-one-ment," God giving us, in Christ, the gift of being able to be at one, made one, in perfect relationship, with God. Christ brought about at-one-ment.

Jeremiah caught a glimpse of this centuries before it happened. He tells us about what God's shown him in many places; this is just one. And what's particularly striking about this particular vision of God's purpose so long before the birth of its principal character, Jesus, is that Jeremiah saw it in the middle of chaos that makes our present world condition look like a celebration party.

By the time we get to this point in the record of Jeremiah's work, he's been telling everybody around him that Jerusalem, the city of God, is doomed. The home of the Temple, God's own house, is going to be swept away, the people carted off to captivity, slavery, and death.

God is not going to get them out of this.

That is not a happy message for those who have to hear it. In fact, Jeremiah has already survived attempts on his life, and at the time of this prophecy he's in prison for what we'd call treason.

At least to me, that seems far more bleak even than what we face today.

But though God isn't going to get Jeremiah and his contemporaries out of this pickle, God is going to work out his master plan. When everything is crumbling around Jeremiah, while he himself is in prison, expecting death at any moment, he is granted an amazing vision of what is coming: it's God doing something new, something breathtaking, something even more difficult to wrap our minds around than that the creator of the universe would care about human beings, even enter into an agreement, a covenant, with them.

What is that breathtaking act? God's upgrading the covenant. The covenant they couldn't even keep! Sort of like those TV commercials: "But wait! Act now, and we'll double your order!" In the middle of chaos, when all seems darkest, Jeremiah still knows God's at work.

But it's so much more than that: God tells Jeremiah that he will make more than just a covenant with his people, a group, a nation. It's a covenant with each person, each of us, so intimate that it's written on our hearts. But what does that mean?

Obviously, our hearts are critically important to our continued ability to carry on with life. Even Jeremiah's ancient culture understood that, and understood the heart not just to be the center of our body's machinery, but the place where our feelings, our will, our true nature originate. Change your heart, it changes not just your mind, but your whole being.

There's an old gospel song that goes "When God dips his pen of love into my heart, and he writes my soul a message he wants me to know/his spirit all divine fills a sinful soul of mine – when God dips his love in my heart..."

What a fascinating image to put together with Jeremiah's vision of God's writing! An old dipping pen, scrawling out this message on our hearts. A love letter.

It's perhaps more than you want to know, but hymns and carols are actually the words, not the music, though we've long since lost the distinction. The music is the tune to which the carol or hymn is set.

Why did I just tell you this? Because God is ready to write his love message on your heart. I think today would be a terrific time for you to have that happen. And, given this season, I'd like to think of that message of love as a Christmas carol: one just for you. When was the last time you got something that personal as a gift? God, this Christmas, writing a carol on your heart. Perhaps even set to music.

And in this age when transplanted hearts and even artificial hearts are almost commonplace, you can have a new heart, too: not a literally new one, but one that's been changed by having God's message of a new life, forgiveness, a new and closer relationship with him written on it.

The words? Well, they're God's words. They're just for you – they're a Christmas carol just for you.

Our physical hearts are, well, not exactly new. But “new” can be just another word for “changed.” And though change is something we instinctively resist unless we can see clearly that it's going to make things better, it just may be that this Christmas, God will grant you that Jeremiah-glimpse of the incredible future that's in store for all of us thanks to Jesus Christ.

It just may be that you'll have a chance to see through the very real pain and suffering, injustice and cruelty, and, frankly, just petty junk that clutters up our lives and this tired world, and hear the faint but enchanting music – and words – of the carol God's writing on your heart. Another verse of that Gospel song goes like this: “Well, sometimes, though the way is dreary, dark and cold/and some unburdened sorrow keeps me from the goal/I go to God in prayer – I can always find him there – to whisper sweet peace to my soul.”

Can God be so powerful as to change our – your – heart this Christmas, and make happen what another great prophet saw? Ezekiel, in similar dreary, dark, and cold times heard God tell him this: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” (36:28) There are plenty of stony hearts out there. Some of them in here. My own can get

awfully hard, too – any heart gets hard after getting hurt, beaten, wounded: so much scar tissue. But God giving us back hearts of flesh lets us know the compassion, the love, the heart of Christ for all people.

All that's possible because of Jesus Christ, the heart of Christmas. And, yes, God is that powerful. Are you willing to trust that God will bring each one of us safely through whatever lies waiting in your personal path, in and for the world around us? Are you willing to have the faith to believe that God will, truly, make all things new?

Then God *has* written on your heart. What words of comfort are there for you to celebrate not just this Christmas, but in the triumph of God in Christ for all time? Go to God in prayer, listen for the spirit, hear the heart of Christmas, and let it be known.