Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34

**Introduction**

I’d ask it as a hands up, but I don’t want to embarrass anybody. So don’t put the hands up, I’m just going to ask the questions rhetorically and assume some answers. How many have tried, maybe multiple times, a read through the bible in a year program? One that started in Genesis? Most Christians have tried this at some point. How many made it all the way through, or at least close enough to count? That number is much less.

Genesis is easy. Exodus isn’t bad, if the end of it might start losing some people as it goes on about how to construct the tabernacle. Leviticus is when you start losing large numbers. The Priestly rounds of sacrifice. The Kosher laws. But even Leviticus can have a strange attraction if you’ve never really read it before. If you are willing to give yourselves some time to ponder the laws. But then you hit Numbers. By this time everyone is wondering for 40 years in the wilderness of the reading plan. The initial rush of commitment to doing this is long past. The weather outside might be getting warmer – assuming you started this New Years. And soon you’ve missed a few days. And then enough to realize – not this year.

But maybe you are one of those who have pushed beyond that. And if you have the reading gets easier. You are into the history books of Israel. From conquest through Kingdoms to Exile. And there are lots of crazy stories in there. Lots of “I didn’t know that was there” moments. You lose a few more in Job. Unless you just happen to be in the right frame of mind when you hit Job, his three friends soon put you firmly on Job’s side – just kill me already so I don’t have to listen to you anymore. But if you get to the whirlwind at the end you are delivered to the Psalms and you are fine probably even through Isaiah. There are just enough familiar and moving passages in Isaiah to keep reading. But if you’ve made it to this point – and I’d put the band who has made it this far at less than 10% who start out - you hit Jeremiah. Jeremiah has stopped my attempts at this more than once.

Even though you’ve read the complete history of Israel. Even though you are reading the Bible in this way because you are a Christian and know the fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jeremiah is just so bleak. And when not bleak it is masochistic. And you can’t believe the God revealed in Jesus Christ is the same God. At least this is my experience. I’m convinced the great heretic Marcion must have come up with his idea that it wasn’t, and that you needed to pitch out the old testament, from reading Jeremiah.

**Text**

Let me suggest that reading experience, an experience typically of failure, is probably a good thing. Because most of us start off on such a reading through the power of the law. We are going to bind it on our wrists and on our foreheads. We are going to put it on our doorposts before we leave and as we come home. We are going to persevere in the desert. We are going to see the promised land. We are going to watch and pray in the garden. We are going to drink the cup to the dregs.

We have been taken out of Egypt. Lead by the hand of the LORD in whatever manner was ours. Be that our parents as babies, be that crushed by life on our knees, or on some other road to Damascus – we start our first read of the Word of God under the old covenant. We were told to “Know the Lord” and given the book. Maybe we have neighbors and brothers who have reinforced and helped. That is better, people to share the load. But usually the first times we try this we try it alone. And we are trying to know the LORD with this – our heads. And I don’t want to run down the head too much. I’m a pretty big nerd after all. The head has it’s place. But if you know the Lord with your head – it is not the LORD.

Reading the Word of God under the covenant of the law – even if you somehow gut it out all the way to Revelation – is failure. Maybe even worse if somehow you do make it. Because the purpose of the law is to break you. The purpose of the law is to deliver you to the foot of the cross.

When Jesus said he was heading to the cross – immediately after Peter had confessed him as Christ – Peter would have none of it. And Jesus rebuked him. Right after the transfiguration Jesus brings up the cross again. But the disciples were discussing “who is the greatest?” Trying to figure our the law of succession. And a third time Jesus predicts the cross. And James and John decide to take the bull by the horns. “Give us the thrones on the right and the left.” Being told that we have to go to the cross is not something our head can understand, nor our gut desire. The cross is only heart knowledge.

**Christology**

The cross is only when we’ve lost everything. When we’ve been defeated. When the last scrap of personal pride and dignity has been stripped. We we’ve tried with all the strength of our own commitment, and found out it wasn’t enough. That even though we have been lead by the hand by God out of Egypt, we grumble and wish to go back.

Reading the bible straight through can occasionally drop you so beaten and defeated at this passage of Jeremiah. “Behold, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant…not like the old covenant they broke…I will put my law within them…I will write it on their hearts…I will be their God and they shall be my people.”

This law is obviously not like the other. This is not the law that we can know by reading. The revealed law of the 10 commandments. Neither is this the law that we know in our gut. The natural law – nature, red in tooth and claw. Those laws still have their place. Which is to deliver us here. To the law of the heart. To staring at the cross and pondering what God is this and who are his people.

Obviously not a God who came to be served. Not a God whose purpose is domination. Not a God who is worried about succession plans. But also not a God who is so terribly angry over “my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband.” If you make it past Jeremiah, you eventually get to Hosea which helps with that. This is not a God who cares about all the things that are so dear to us: Glory, power, dominion, praise, riches. All the things that our guts tell us we need more of. That our heads spend time contemplating how to get and how to grow.

This is a God who wants the heart. This is a God who is there at exactly the moment your heart might be open to hearing him. When all the laws that we carry in our guts and our heads have lead us to ruin and dropped us at the foot of the cross. When all the idols that they produce and set on the plinth of our hearts have been proven false and left us naked and half dead on the side of the road. When we are done trying to make deals with the universe for one more roll of the dice. This is the crucified one. The God of love, who wishes to bind those wounds and make you whole. Who wishes to let you know that you still have a God and a people. Who declares to you, “I forgive you sin, and I remember you sin no more.”

This is something that only the heart can understand. This is a God who does the hard work, of turning hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. A God who was willing to suffer, and wait for all of lost humanity to wash up at the foot of the cross. For that moment that he might write his law of love on our hearts. That time when he can gather a people who desire a true God, and not all the idols we make.

**Conclusion**

It is a different read with that law written on your hearts. It’s the story of God and all the ways we might not know him, but learn to live with God, learn to be his people.

That law is written on the heart – so we will to do it. And the Spirit is willing. But in this world the flesh is sometimes weak.

Which is why we have Christ as our High Priest. Not just that he might “deal gently with the ignorant and wayward.” But that he might forgive.

It can be a harsh forgiveness. It is only for sinners. If you aren’t at the foot of cross, it isn’t for you. But if you are there. If you are in need of God. He’s there. Amen.