

“Cardiac Implant”

Kathleen Norris is a poet and a Presbyterian, but not a Presbyterian poet. She is also an oblate at a Benedictine Abbey located on the remote South Dakota plains. The monks at St. Johns hear the entire New Testament each year by listening to each book read during morning and evening prayer. Kathleen spent several weeks at St. John’s one fall while the monks were reading the prophet, Jeremiah. She writes, *“Listening to Jeremiah is a heck of a way to get your blood going in the morning; it puts caffeine to shame.”*

Jeremiah was an intense prophet who alternated between raw anger at Israel and God, and grief over the people’s sin. For example, in chapter 2 he likened Israel to a camel in heat:

“How dare you tell me, ‘I’m not stained by sin.’ Look at the tracks you’ve left behind in the valley. How do you account for what is written in the desert dust—tracks of a camel in heat, running this way and that, tracks of a wild donkey in rut, sniffing the wind for the slightest scent of sex.

One day, after reading particularly heavy, depressing verses from Jeremiah, a monk told Kathleen he was glad they were reading Jeremiah in the morning, and not at evening prayer, when there are more people likely to be guests. *“The monks can take it,” he said, “but most people have no idea what’s in the Bible, and they come unglued.”*

The monk’s comment triggered a song in my head. It was by a band called, The Guess Who, and went like this:

**She's come undone
She didn't know
what she was headed for
And when I found
what she was headed for
It was too late**

**She's come undone
She found a mountain
that was far too high
And when she found out
she couldn't fly
It was too late**

**It's too late
She's gone too far
She's lost the sun
She's come undone.**

**Coming unglued. Coming undone. Coming apart at the seams.
Falling off your hinges. These are metaphors of what happened
to Israel. Israel turned its back on God's covenant, but by the
time Israel realized what was coming, it was too late. The
invading armies of Babylon breached the walls of Jerusalem.
Their beloved temple was reduced to rubble. People not killed by
in the onslaught were deported to Babylon. Their sorrowful state
was captured in this lament from Psalm 137:**

***By the rivers of Babylon --
there we sat down and wept
when we remembered Zion.***

***On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,***

*and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
Sing us one of the songs of Zion!*

How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?

Coming undone describes Israel in 587 B.C., and the United States in 2009 A.D., and, by extension, the world. The poisoning of our planet. Economic collapse. The disappearing middle class. The swelling ranks of the poor and unemployed. One percent of the population controlling most of the world's wealth. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and another war at the border with Mexico where drug cartels kill to corner the market of America's drug addiction. Today, and every day in our world, 11,000 children die from preventable causes, while big banks use billions of taxpayer's bailout dollars for obscene executive bonuses and a \$10 million office renovation for executives at Citibank. Meanwhile, about 80% of Americans say they believe in God, and considered themselves "spiritual," but not religious, and what difference it makes is anybody's guess.

What is going on? The Bible's most sobering book, Ecclesiastes, tells us, "*There is nothing new under the sun.*" The problem is old. At worst, we are unable, or at best, we are unwilling, to abide by the rules of good and righteous living. The root of the problem is the same as it ever was -- pride, gluttony, greed, envy, lust, bowing down to our stupid idols and the failure to honor promises.

In Scripture, our relationship with God is defined in terms of covenants. God is so determined to have us, love us and enjoy our love in return that God established covenants. In ancient Israel as well as in other cultures of that period, blood sacrifice was the way covenants with God were expressed.

When negotiating a purchase, we sometimes hear the expression, *"I'll cut you a deal."* This may go back thousands of years to something called, "cutting a covenant." Sacrificial animals were cut in two and the covenant-makers walked between the two halves. The seriousness of the act was attested to by the words spoken after walking between the severed parts: *"May this happen to me if I violate this covenant."* Beginning with Abraham, the men of Israel cut a covenant with God by circumcision.

As we have moved through Lent we looked at the rainbow covenant God made to Noah to never again destroy the earth. God made a covenant through Moses who delivered the Ten Commandments. But the covenants didn't work. Rainbows aren't a great reminder because they don't appear very often, and when they do we're usually not looking. Ten Commandments chiseled in stone are a pain to lug around. Could God have overstated our ability to keep them?

These covenants weren't working because they were external. We do not do well with rules and restrictions. The mere presence of rules guarantees their breakage. Adam and Eve were told they could eat from any tree they wanted, except the one at the center of the garden. What happened? Mom tells her kids, "Don't eat those warm chocolate chip cookies that are cooling in the kitchen." What happens? God wasn't interested in our obedience. God wanted a relationship with us, and obedience wouldn't make it happen. Should not, can not, and must not isn't the language of love. "If you love me," Jesus said, "you will keep my commandments." Love compels us to do right not because we should or must, but because we want to.

Jeremiah 31 is that high-water mark of the Old Testament. Frustrated by our sin and our inability to keep God's commandments, God adopted a new strategy.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah... 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. 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, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Forget rainbows and statutes in stone. Forget external laws that aren't kept. ***I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts.*** The German theologian Paul Tillich said there are three forms of law. The first is HETERONOMY where the law is outside of you. The second is AUTONOMY, the law of self-rule. ***"I will decide what I will do, not you!"*** The third is THEONOMY -- the law implanted in our hearts that becomes part of us.

God didn't ask Irael if it wanted a new covenant. No one said, "Lord, we're doing a pitiful job keeping your laws. Lend us a hand."

We hear people talk about, "letting Jesus into their hearts." We picture Jesus waiting patiently outside our door, knocking softly and gently. Since we are *autonomous*, we decide when we are ready to open the door and let him in. It doesn't work like this with Jeremiah. It has nothing to do with being ready or granting God permission to establish residence in the home of our hearts. We don't sign consent forms before God performs heart surgery. ***"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."***

Preachers are under no illusion that their words will change anyone. You won't become better, obedient, giving people

because I tell you to do it. The best preachers can do is pray that God will use our feeble sermons to stir what God has already implanted in your heart. It is reassuring to know that the God we seek is not in some parallel universe, but resides deep within us.

A woman was asked, *“What do you think of God?”* She replied, “God is not a think. God is a feel.” This is heart language. In Eugene Peterson’s book, *Christ Plays in a Thousand Places*, is this quote: “As soon as the Gospels were written, speech without experience began to dabble with the new facts proposed by the existence of the church.” In other words, talk took the place of relationship. “People tried to *think the new life without being touched by it* in some form of call, listening, passion or change of heart.”

When theologians die, they find themselves standing before two signs pointing in opposite directions. One says, *“The Kingdom of Heaven.”* The other says, *“Discussions About the Kingdom of Heaven.”* Don’t confuse “talking about” God, or “offering ideas” about God with knowing God in a deep, intimate, energizing way. Christianity gets rendered down to Sunday school discussions that may be interesting but have no power to change us. Christianity is not intellectual calisthenics. An intellectualized God stored in the brain’s grey matter won’t stir the heart. God isn’t a think -- God is a feel. Christianity isn’t a head-trip. It is personal transformation.

Transformation at the hands of God is a wonderful thing, but not painless. One of Gary Larson’s *Far Side* cartoons shows a corral full of Texas longhorn cattle. Their bulging eyes show terror as they watch a cowboy heat a branding iron in the fire. The brand about to be burned into their hindquarters wasn’t a simple “Circle K” or some such brand. They were about to get burned with a brand saying, *“This here cow is the property of Pecos Pete.”*

The law written on our hearts brands us as God's property. We're not all the way there yet. *"The days are coming, says the Lord."* The brand shows we don't belong to the world or ourselves any longer. There is a wonderful verse from a hymn that speaks about what happens when God takes hold of us. It goes, *"Our little systems have their day. They have their day and cease to be."*

Little pieces of us die, and to our surprise, we live, not out of duty, not by obeying policies, procedures or external laws, but out of the love God has written on our hearts. Love makes us do crazy things. The one we love inhabits our thoughts. We say and do things out of character. We give things up and don't mind. Our actions reflect what has overcome our heart. We become changed people who want to be at our lover's disposal.

We don't pull it off ourselves. God's grace makes it happen. *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, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*