

Last week, we had talked about the meaning of Christmas. Because the world has all kinds of ideas about what Christmas means, but unfortunately they don't involve Jesus. Because the world says that Christmas means that we should be better people, that we should be nicer to one another, that we should feel festive in this time of year. Just get into the holiday spirit, it says, and all of your problems will go away, at least for a while. That's what Christmas is all about. We don't need Jesus in order to celebrate Christmas. But Christians, Jesus is essential. We need Jesus to understand Christmas. Because if Christ had not been born, then yeah, you could still say all of those other things. You could still say we should be better, we should be nicer, whatever it may be, but then we wouldn't have a real Christmas. Jesus has been born. Christ's birth changes everything. Because last week we heard how the birth of Christ gives us hope for the future. But now this week, Jeremiah goes on to show us that the birth of Christ also brings us joy.

Because I want you to think about what the angels said in Luke chapter 2. They said to the shepherds: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Why does the birth of Christ bring us great joy? Because he is the Savior, of course, and being the Savior, he brings us back to God. Jesus being born means that we are now in a right relationship with the Father. In other words, Jesus was born to make us God's people, even those of us who didn't know God before. And that gives us joy, Christians, joy to know that we are where we are today and we are who we are today because Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

But how do we know for sure that God has made us his people? Jeremiah tells us: through the covenant that he has made. Jeremiah says in verse 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." Of course, Jeremiah was looking towards the future when he said this. This would happen long after his lifetime. But in those days, he says, the Lord would make a new covenant, one totally different from what came before.

"Well, what makes it new?" we might ask. Jeremiah says, verse 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." So what makes it new, in other words, is that it's now written on the heart. It's no longer something that's just outside, something that is external. Because the old covenant was written on stone, Christians, the two stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. And yes, God himself wrote the law on those tablets with his own finger. It was holy and righteous and good because it came from God. But it was something only on stone. It was never written on the heart, and for that reason it didn't change the heart. Everything was still the same as before.

Think of it this way. Think of a sign, for example, like a speed limit sign out on the highway. When we see that speed limit sign, we understand what it's trying to say. We know that that's the law. That's what we should do, so we try to adjust our speed accordingly, because we know that it changes the way that we act, at least it should. But that speed limit sign is not written on your heart. It's something external to you. And because it's something external, something outside of you, it doesn't change who you are. You might look at that sign and say, "Well, I don't want to do that! I'm either going to go slower or even going to go faster, because it's just a sign. Yes, it's the

law, but it doesn't change who I am." And that's the way that it was with the old covenant. Israel had the law. They knew what God wanted. It was holy. It was righteous. It was good. But it didn't change their heart. They continued to sin. They continued to break that covenant. So the only thing that could be done was to give them a new heart, to change them from within. And that's exactly what the new covenant would do. It would write the law on their hearts so that they would become a new creation. They would be God's people in a way that they had not been before.

Where do we find this new covenant? Where can we look to? In Jesus Christ. Because listen to what Jesus says on the night when he was betrayed, when he took the cup, Luke chapter 22: "Likewise, the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'" Jesus tells us clearly he is the new covenant. Through him we are given a new heart. Through him the law has been written on that heart. Through him God is now our God, and we are now his people. Jesus is the beginning of the new covenant, exactly what Jeremiah was talking about in chapter 31.

And Paul also goes on to say in 2 Corinthians: "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." So the old covenant, the covenant of the letter, could not give life, because it was something external. It was something written on stone. But the new covenant, the covenant of the Spirit, gives us life through Jesus Christ, because now it has been written on our hearts. As Paul says again in 2 Corinthians: "You show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts." So Jesus is the new covenant, the beginning, one which is totally different from what came before.

What else do we know about the difference? What else makes it new? What else makes it different from the old? Jeremiah tells us again, verse 34: "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." So no longer would anyone have to say "know the Lord," because everyone will know him. Now, this doesn't mean that we're going to have perfect knowledge or that we don't need teachers or anything like that. That's why God gives pastors and other things to teach us. We still need to grow. We still need to learn. But rather what Jeremiah means is that everyone will know the Lord within. We have the knowledge of the Lord written on our hearts. We have become his people in a new and greater way. Because in the Old Testament, Christians, the Spirit was not given to everyone. Only some people had it. People like the kings, people like the prophets, and a few others. That was it. Not everyone in Israel knew the Lord in that way. And besides that, the Spirit was not given in the same way to those people either. Some only knew him for a short time, but some had him in such measures that they felt overwhelmed, like they were being completely crushed underneath him. So in other words, we see something very different in the Old Testament, so that people would have to say to one another, "know the Lord."

But now in the New Testament, the time that we live in, the Spirit is given to all who believe. Acts chapter 2 says: "In the last days, it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." Now we all know him from the greatest to the least, because we have all been forgiven through Jesus Christ. God has forgiven us our iniquity because of his Son. God no longer remembers our sins because of Jesus. And all of this has happened because Christ was born in Bethlehem. The new covenant has come, and we are now God's people forever.

But we might ask, "Well, how do we know that for sure? How do we know that God is serious about this? Because after all, there is an old covenant, right? It came to an end. How do we know that what God is promising to us now will continue? How do we know that he's not going to change his mind?" Listen to what Jeremiah says, 35 and 36: "Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, the Lord of hosts is his name: 'If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.'" God shows just how serious he is, Christians, by pointing to the creation. He says, "Before I would forget my promise, before I would forget my covenant, the sun would go out of the sky or rise in the west. Before I would forget my covenant, the moon would no longer give its light or simply disappear. Before I would forget my covenant, the stars would fall from the sky and not give their light." That's how serious he is, Christians. All of these things about the creation around us will go away before--long before!--God would ever forget us as his people.

But we have something far more certain than sun or moon or stars. Something that shows that God is completely serious. Something which shows that God's promises will not come to an end. And that is his Son, Jesus Christ, who has been born. Jesus is the proof that we belong to God. Jesus is the proof that we are indeed God's people. Because as Paul says in Romans 10: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That is a promise that God has made, a promise that he will not go back on. We know that we are his people because he has given us Christ.

So Christians, Christmas brings us joy, because we know that we have been made right with God. Without Jesus, we would still be in our sins, but with Jesus, we are forgiven. God is our God, and we are his people, because Jesus has been born. So in this Advent season and in the Christmas season and every day that is to come, let us rejoice together with the angels, because Christ has been born in Bethlehem to make us his own forever.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to show that you love us and that you have made us your people. Help us always to turn towards him in everything so that we may rejoice in him. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.