

Beyond the Horizon

Week 1

By Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

Well, today is the first Sunday of Lent. If you didn't grow up in a church that followed the traditional church calendar, or even if you did, you might be saying, what exactly is lent? Now, the idea of lent started around the year 300, and it was really just this time of preparation of Easter and also baptisms, happened on, on Easter.

So it's it was centered around fasting from food, because Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness, and the whole church parties participated in this fast. But so 100 years passed, and then a thousand years passed. And this the idea of fasting from food became a little lax. And so it turned into a time of giving up something, a period of giving up some sort of luxury.

So, ash, lent begins on Ash Wednesday. So we had an Ash Wednesday service. You may have, joined us for that. And, on Ash Wednesday, what we do is we acknowledge our mortality and our sinfulness and our need for a savior. So lent continues for 40 days of self-examination and reflection and renewal. Now it's 40 days.

But that doesn't include, Sundays, because Sundays are always considered a mini Easter or a mini Resurrection Day. Now, maybe you are fasting or you are giving up something for lent. I've done it many times over the years. One time, probably about 15 years ago, I was the youth director at the time, and the youth director and the youth were in charge of the Ash Wednesday service.

And so we decided that we were going to encourage everyone to, add and delete something during lent. Right. Add something to their life, like daily Bible reading or prayer, and then delete something out of their life. Fasting from something. And so I knew that, you know, I'm going to I'm going to say this to the youth.

I'm going to say this to the congregation. So I knew whatever I deleted or fasted from, in my life, I knew I had to be kind of a big deal for me. And so I decided I was going to, give up wearing makeup. Now, 15 years ago, I wore a little bit more makeup than I do now.

I would never have left the house without my makeup on. Now you'll see me with either very minimal makeup on or, or no makeup on. But 15 years ago, like, that was a big deal for me to give up wearing makeup for this whole time. So I made the announcement on Ash Wednesday, and the very next morning, I woke up with a giant zit right on the tip of my nose.

Like, seriously. Like right on the tip of my nose. And I was like, okay, well, now what do I do? And so on my way to work the next morning, I stopped at CVS or Walgreens. I'm like, I find

some pimple medication, something that's going to get rid of this zit as fast as it as possible, right?

So I'm at Walgreens, I'm looking through all the medications and, you know, acne and whatever. And I find, a tinted acne medication. Right. Like, tinted, as in, like, has the little slight, like, cover up, right? And I was like, well, this isn't exactly makeup. This is this is an acne medication. So I bought it, I used it, and it was awful.

It was like so dark. And it just brought even more attention to the zit that was on my face. So I started to realize something. Not just then, but probably even years later, that even though I was faithfully giving up something for lent soda, chocolate, TV, right? Things, things like that, I realized that I was doing it to either prove something to myself or prove something to others.

You know, I was I asked the question like, do I have enough self-discipline to not eat chocolate the entire time of lent? And it kind of turned into this New Year's resolution, where I would do it for a while, and then I would stop, or certainly after the end of lent, I would just go back doing whatever I had been doing, like it didn't change me at all when I gave up something.

I also felt like I was checking something off of a list. Right? Like this is the good Christian thing to do is to give up something for lent. And I'm I, I kind of felt like I was proving myself to other people, that I was a follower of Jesus. By doing this. And for me, it just wasn't working.

It didn't it didn't work. I wasn't growing closer to God by doing the things that I had said I was going to do. Now, if giving up something for lent draws you closer to God, then that is great and I encourage you to do it. I'm still, trying to, give up some of my screen time during lent.

I still feel like that's a good practice, because the less screen time I have, the more I can do devotionals and Bible reading. And I hope that continues after lent. But what is it? What can we do that can really move us into a deeper relationship with God? And what it is that we do is we examine our hearts.

It's like much deeper than, I'm going to give up chocolate. We examine our hearts and then we recommit to God's covenant. Now the people of Israel also did this right. They reflected on their covenant with God, and they gave thanks to God for God's faithfulness. And we too are called to reflect on God's promises as we prepare for the Easter celebration.

Now, this week, we are going to be introducing, the John Wesley Covenant Prayer. You probably got a card on your way in, or you can just Google John Wesley Covenant Prayer

and it will pop up. And we're going to focus on this prayer the entire season of lent, kind of one, part of the prayer, at a time.

But to start learning about this covenant that God wants with us, we're going to read from the book of Jeremiah, which is found in the Old Testament. Now, Jeremiah was a prophet, and he lived around 600 700 BCE. And Jeremiah was called to be a prophet to warn the Israelites of their wrongdoings and their injustice, like there's consequences to your injustice.

So, he emphasized, Jeremiah emphasized the need to restore this covenant with God. Now, Jeremiah is a it's a it's a deep book. It's a heavy book. There's a lot of warnings. There's a lot of tough messages in the book of Jeremiah. It's calling the people of Judah out for their sins. It kind of reminds me of social media today, right?

People calling people out for their sins. Some of it may be, prophesying from God and other is just hate. Feel filled. But Jeremiah is painting this picture and it's grim and it's he's talking about what's coming. He's like, the destruction of your nation is coming. The exile to Babylon is coming.

So Jeremiah receives these words from God and then report the words to the people. But in the middle of the book, there's, there's a the in the middle of this book of doom and gloom. There's kind of this glimmer of hope. So Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 and 32, the time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.

It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me, even though I was their husband, declares the Lord. Now, in John Golden Gaze commentary, he says, it's a mystery to God and to Jeremiah how Israel could possibly have decided to disregard God's covenant.

He this they disregarded God's commandments. And says, it's this mystery. They disregarded it by worshiping other gods, by making idols to help them worship other gods, by attaching gods names to things like social policies, political policies that weren't, part of what God was doing. Ignoring the Sabbath, and so on. They disregarded what God had asked them to do.

So God's like something more radical needs to happen in order to be done for Israel, in order for Israel to be successful. Now, sometimes this text that's found in the Old Testament has been used as kind of like this division. Right. The Old Testament is Israel relevant? It's outdated. It's separate from the New Testament, the New covenant.

And there's this, sometimes it's this is used as a division between well, those are for the Jews and those are for the Christians. But really, it is part of this one story that Christians we are a part of this one story. Now, if you don't know much about how the Old Testament and the New Testament ties together and you want to learn more, if you want to take a step this Lenten and do something a little bit, get into the Scripture a little bit more, I'm going to invite you to sign up for a class that starts tomorrow.

And this is a discipleship class, and you will go through the Old Testament and then the New Testament. Pastor John Newton, he's a retired United Methodist pastor. He, him and, Todd Miller will lead this class together. And I promise you, you will gain something from attending this class. It's kind of a big commitment, but, but it's really important to understand how, scripture, plays out, how it ties together, and how it impacts our lives today.

Now, if you were on something a little bit easier, a little less commitment, there is another class called, spiritual practices. And this class is led by Patti Mook. It's seven weeks. This is also a perfect thing to do for lent. It's a way to think about, things that we do and how, how we can connect with God.

And so that class is on that starts this Thursday. And so I'll invite you to consider, one of those classes that you can, grow this lent. So we're going to go back to Jeremiah. But before we go back to Jeremiah, we need to talk about a covenant. A covenant is a, a two way relationship. And when we think about a covenant today, sometimes we insert the word contract instead.

We think of signing a contract or signing the papers often time that comes with property. But in the Bible, it's not signing a contract, it's not making a covenant or contract. It's actually the Hebrew word is cutting a covenant. That's what we're doing. We're cutting a covenant. In the Old Testament, there was this way of making a covenant where you would, cut animal length lengthwise and spread them out and walk in between the two.

You have circumcision or cutting as a sign of the covenant for men. Later on you have circumcision of your heart cutting things out of your life. So breaking this covenant is a is, could sometimes mean death. And that's the symbolism of walking in between the two cut animals, the blood, the life of the animal pouring out.

So, in other words, covenants are a big deal to God. So we continue on in in Jeremiah verse 33. And the Lord says, no, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord, I will put my instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

So here is the new covenant. This new covenant is going to be a little bit different than the old covenant God is saying. So the New covenant, is different. The old covenant God's people just couldn't seem to follow. So God's like, I'm going to do something different now in our Bibles. We have the Old Testament, in the New Testament, or the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

And we often times think that there's only two covenants in the Bible, but there's lots more than two covenants in the Bible. There's five major covenants that God has made with God's people. There's the covenant between God and Noah and Abraham and, and Moses and David, and then this new covenant that we have in Jeremiah. Now, covenants are important part of understanding the big story of the Bible, but more importantly, understand God, because God is a covenant making, covenant keeping, covenant fulfilling God.

That's the God that we serve. So God says in Jeremiah that there's this new covenant coming and the time is coming where people will follow God, not because they they have to, but because they want to. And all people will know God. So the old covenant, one of the old covenants, was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and that covenant was resisted and broken.

So part of that covenant was the Ten Commandments that were written on stone to be posted in the camps, to be seen by all the people. And it didn't work, right. We could we could post the Ten Commandments on every single wall that ever exist in this whole wide world, and it wouldn't change people's hearts. See, these are external guidelines.

God is saying that's the old. But the new covenant is internal guidelines. Now, it doesn't mean that the Old covenant or the Ten Commandments are not important. Of course they are important. They are part of who we are as followers of Jesus. But this new covenant will be written on our hearts. We will see actually people transform, not just see something written down, but we will see people transform, ready for, commitment with God and our community.

And we will know that that our hearts have been engraved with God's covenant. When obedience starts to feel natural, like it's second nature, loving God and loving others, even loving our enemies won't feel like a chore, but it'll just be what we do. Without even thinking about it. Will give, will serve, will help people. Because. Not because we have to, but because it brings us joy.

And more importantly, it brings God joy. So Jesus paints this picture in Matthew chapter 25 when he asks the righteous, you know that when the righteous ask God Jesus, when they

say, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? When did we see you thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you in prison and visit you?

See, they weren't trying to check a box of what to do or what not to do or to earn points. They were just living out God's love without even realizing it. Jesus is like, hey, you know when you when you, you know, you fed the least of these, you were feeding me and they were like, oh, well, that's just something we do.

We didn't know that it was that right. That's just who we are feeding and visiting and caring for people. Back to Jeremiah. Jeremiah, verse 34. They will no longer need to teach each other to say, know the Lord, because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wrongdoings and never again remember their sins.

Lent is a time where we prepare for this new covenant. As Christians, when we read this, we insert Jesus into this promise that Jesus has come to fill this, this, this new covenant. We think about Jesus at the Last Supper when he says, you know, drink from this, all of you. This is the blood of the new covenant poured out for you, and many for the forgiveness of sins.

And so we put Jesus into this, into this text. We say, okay, here we go. Jesus has fulfilled this covenant. And Jesus came not just for Judah or for Israel. It's for the whole entire world. And he does this through forgiveness. God didn't forget them when they turned away. God for gave them. That is a powerful statement.

Forgiveness that comes from God is deep and powerful and the idea that now, like, Jews and Christians can read this text in the Old Testament and say this new covenant means that my sins are forgiven, that God has forgiven my sins and God doesn't remember them any more. God fulfilled this new covenant, this new promise, soon after Jeremiah's time and then again in Jesus.

But but we still await for this covenant to be fully complete, to be fully fulfilled. Now, I said that we were going to introduce the Wesley Covenant prayer, and I want to say it together with you. It's kind of a prayer. It's like, wait, what are we saying exactly? And again, we're going to unpack that. What what it exactly means.

But I want to just say it out loud and I'll invite you to take that card or search it up and continue to saying it this, this lent. So let's say this together. I am no longer my own but thine. Put me to what thou wilt. Rank me with whom thou wilt put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee, or brought low for thee. I am no longer my own. Put me. I think this is wrong, but let's keep going. I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt rank. Yeah, see, this is wrong. Okay, let's go to the let me be full part.

Let me be full. Let me be empty. Let me have all things. Let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now a glorious and blessed God. Father, son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And let the covenant which I have made on earth let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen. Okay, well, it was a little bit wrong, but you have the card, and the card actually has, a little bit more updated language in there. So there's not the vows and stuff, but it's a powerful it's a powerful tool to have to say some of those words. And again, we'll, unpack it more, as, as we go.

But John Wesley, wrote this, it was kind of adapted from this Puritan tradition that he was a part of. And he was it was a reminder. It was said it was, to be said at the very beginning of each year to remember our covenant of our baptism. So this covenant prayer is all about living a life devoted to Jesus, following Jesus, representing, Jesus's love in the world.

And it puts us, in our place. But more importantly, it it puts God in God's place. It makes us remember who we are and who God is. Then it reminds us that, the Christian life isn't about, what we believe or how we live. But but not just what we believe, but how we live our lives.

Because this kind of of of life isn't meant to be lived alone. Right? If, if, if all it was is me saying, I believe in Jesus and now I get to go to heaven, that's not what Jesus came to say. This is a covenant that we make with God and with others. We cannot separate those those things. It happens in a community centered on Jesus where we encounter and we support one another in order to live out our lives as followers of Jesus.

So when we do daily devotions or Bible reading, or when we fast, or when we say our prayers, and we grow closer to God, it's not just for the benefit for us as individuals, but it's to make a difference outside of ourselves. It's not just for us. It's when our mission and vision comes to life in the community.

That is when we know that our hearts will be engraved with God. It's why, one of the reasons why we are launching a campaign officially starting next week, this campaign that will bring us beyond ourselves. We're going to be, stretching ourselves in ways that that will help us bring our vision and mission into the community.

Because we don't just follow Jesus on the way to the cross for our own benefit. If we are, we're doing it wrong. We have to look at the covenant that God has given to us, that want, that God wants for us. And remember that this is a covenant for all people. So lent is not just about checking off a box or or proving our faithfulness to ourselves, or to others or even to God.

But it's about a heart that has been reshaped, that has been rewritten, that has been engraved with God's love and covenant. So what if obedience didn't feel like an obligation, but it just overflowed from within? What if forgiveness is not just something that we we recognize that God gives us and that we receive, but it's something that we also freely give to others.

And now, one very simple question that I want you to think about at the beginning of this Lenten season. And it's a simple yes or no or maybe, maybe a maybe answer. But the question is this do you want to have a covenant with God? Do you want to have, renew your covenant with God? Or maybe you've never made a covenant with God?

Do you want to have a new covenant or renew your covenant with God? And if the answer is yes, or maybe then we're on this journey together. And and if you're brand new to this, if you're like, I don't know what it means to follow Jesus, but maybe I want to know more. I invite you to to come and pray with the prayer team.

After the end of the service. You can come up here and just ask for a prayer. You can set up an appointment with me at any time to to talk to me about that. Because if you're ready, if you think you might be ready to really renew this covenant that you have with God, you get to come as you are.

You get to come knowing that you are forgiven. And we walk together during this, this Lenten season, knowing that power that Jesus has done this for us. And when you say that when you when you are ready to make this commitment, it may change your life, it will change your life, and it's going to change the life of others to would you pray with me?

Gracious God, thank you so much for this new covenant and this idea that we get to explore what it means. And we think thousands of years ago, Jeremiah wrote these words about this new covenant. And here today we're talking about what that means, like for our life today. What does it mean to to walk with Jesus? And as we journey this Lenten season to the cross, God, we're going to discover some things about you.

We're going to discover some things about ourselves. And we're going to say we we want more people to know about you. We want to go beyond, the walls of this church and go into our community and say, you know what? There is light and there is hope in this world. So help us to have the faith of, of in confidence that Jeremiah did when he's sharing the words

of God, help us to be open God to what you might be calling us to do as individuals and as a church and God.

I say all of this in Jesus's name, Amen.