

Sunday, March 25, 2012: Jeremiah 31:31–34, Hebrews 5:5–10, John 12:20–33

by [F. Dean Lueking](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue

It's Thursday afternoon or later, and Sunday is coming. For a pastor, the push is on to compose a sermon with application that's relevant to its hearers, along with compelling stories that illumine the connection to daily life. I do not disparage these pressures; I know them myself. But instead of asking ourselves, "What must I get on with?" Duke Chapel dean Samuel Wells urges us to ask a different question when we're probing the biblical text: what's God up to? With this question in mind, we can create connections to daily life that have cosmic consequences. What God is up to, after all, is nothing short of making all things new.

The lesson from Jeremiah 31:31–34 forms a hinge point of towering importance. What God is up to here is a complete makeover of religion, from a calcified external form to an inner vitality alive to God. The Latin roots of the word *religion*—*re* and *ligio*—mean "tying together again." That's what *covenant*, the key word of the text, implies. The old covenant, made by God with the people he delivered from Egypt, collapsed under the weight of an externalized, corrupted religion of form that lacked content. That ancient nemesis—a formalized religion with God left out—is still with us.

Yet Jeremiah, the prophet/preacher who embodied personally the woes of the broken covenant, proclaimed that God was up to a new covenant that would be written not on stone tablets but upon the heart: gut-located, heart-centered, mind-penetrated. At its core is what God is forever up to: forgiving sin and creating the community of the forgiven with a calling in the world. Christians hail the arrival of the new covenant in Jesus, who is God with us. In him we already live by signs and sacraments that point to the greater fullness still ahead. By the grace of the new covenant in the Lord Jesus, religion comforts rather than terrorizes, possesses a soundness that's beyond political partisanship and welcomes the stranger instead of scorning her in her differentness. We preachers must ask ourselves, "Where would Jeremiah see evidence of what God's up to in our world? Where could that discernment lead?"

As one example, it can lead to a starting point for fresh engagement among Christians, Jews and Muslims who long to listen, learn and serve together in their communities. In Chicago, Eboo Patel initiated Interfaith Youth Core, a group that is doing just that. Groups led mainly by young adults are finding ways, as "People of the Book," to get at what God is up to—putting his law within, writing it on the heart—and catching glimpses of it in community service. We're being nudged toward a new grasp of what Jeremiah 31:31–34 promises. It's good to know we're not alone.

Now we're on the cusp of Holy Week. The Hebrews 5 lesson sets forth a very human Jesus who "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears . . . [and who] learned obedience through what he suffered." Who understands those words at first hearing? Exposition explains it this way: God never gets tired—never tires of the heartbroken nor of those who are exasperatingly adrift. He never gets tired of preachers who get tired of people who don't get it. The Letter to the Hebrews is for tired believers, those dubious about the grace of a second chance and in need a fresh grip on what God is up to. Nowadays, when the very word *priest* can furrow the brow, Jesus' priesthood vivifies and deepens pastor-to-people connections.

One way that happens is when preachers visit people at their workplaces, on their turf, for the purpose of knowing what life is like between Sundays for those in the pew. Mutual empathy grows from such visits. I recommend using this hermeneutic learned in the workplace as one part of sermon preparation.

The John 12:20–33 reading offers a half dozen hints as to what God is up to. Each is promising, although the verses of the passage come one after the other in a disconnected jumble. One starting point for a sermon is tucked away in the final two verses, embedded in the verb *draw*—*elkuein*, if your Greek is alive and well (note three other Johannine references to the verb with interesting contrasts: 6:44, drawn to God; 18:10, swordsmanship; 21:6, fishing).

Jesus does not force, bribe or dazzle; he draws people to know and love him. A whole theology of evangelism and ecclesiology rises from this word on how he goes about doing what God is up to. From his uplifted cross, the place where suffering love put him, he draws to himself all who will come. This is folly and scandalous to everything derived from human religiosity. Yet this scandal is the good news of Christ's eternal priesthood: he forgives our sins. He brings us to God. He brings God to us. The medical profession has its caduceus with its shape that resembles a cross. Christians

have Christ, uplifted on his cross, as their healing Lord. With all the grinding brouhaha over our nation's broken health-care system, here is healing that is deeper and infinitely more inclusive than any time-bound cure. And it's free.

We're drawn into the healing community of the forgiven—not yanked or cajoled or sweet-talked. Pondering what God is up to in such gentle, magnetic, sure-handed drawing, we can allow our preaching to be assured rather than shrill, persuasive more than demanding, and patient in awaiting God's outcomes.