

**+ Jeremiah 31:31-34 + Our Future Starts with God's Forgiveness +
+ 1st Sunday of End Time: Reformation Sunday + 25 October 2015 +**

This year we've heard a lot and talked a lot about our past. We've read and recalled the history of our congregation—remembering those who served faithfully before us and how the Lord brought our congregation through good times and bad. We even bid farewell to the former sanctuary that served us well for nearly 35 years. All that talk and celebration of the past is expected since 2015 is the 40th anniversary of our congregation.

The present year has also been one of the most exciting in our history. From financing approval right before Christmas to groundbreaking on Easter Sunday to the pouring of a new foundation to the arrival of the Builders to the first service in this sanctuary complete with scaffolding and a lack of drywall to a list of details that's finally shrinking, it's been an exciting year. Where we stand right now is nothing short of amazing because of where the Lord has brought us.

Now we stand at the beginning of the final season of the Christian church year—the season of End Time. As humbling as it is to look back and celebrate our past, as amazing as it is to look at our present, these final weeks of another church year give us the opportunity to look ahead to the future. Between now and November 22 (Dedication Day), we're going to look ahead to our future. Now even though I have the name of an Old Testament prophet, that doesn't mean we'll be gazing into the foggy future to find out what's going to happen to our congregation or community or country. Only the Lord knows that, but the Lord does reveal what our future with him looks like no matter what's going on in the world and especially as we near the Last Day.

Now it's a little ironic that we're starting a series on "Our Future" on Reformation Sunday—the Sunday when we remember what the Lord accomplished for his Church through the reformer Martin Luther. It's typically a Sunday of looking back, but today that look back to the past will help us to see that **OUR FUTURE STARTS WITH GOD'S FORGIVENESS.**

At Jeremiah's time, the future looked pretty bleak. The way things had worked in the past was failing. The old covenant that the Lord had established with Israel was crumbling apart. Two hundred years before, the Lord had allowed Assyrian armies to sweep away the ten northern tribes of Israel. Only two remained, but the clock was ticking. The armies of Babylon were laying waste to every kingdom and city in their path, but the Lord had raised mighty Babylon for one purpose—to carry out his judgment on the unfaithful kingdom of Judah. Soon Jerusalem and her nearby cities would be under siege, her walls toppled to the ground, her temple burned and destroyed, and her citizens carried off into exile, all because they had rejected their faithful God and broken his covenant for so long.

It hadn't always been that way. Centuries before, God had established that covenant (agreement) between himself and his people, the Israelites. He had delivered them from 400 years of slavery in Egypt with devastating plagues and mighty miracles. Then he brought those two million people to the foot of Mount Sinai in the wilderness to establish a covenant with them. His appearance, though, was terrifying. ***"Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder."*** (Exodus 19:18-19)

It was going to be a two-way covenant. If the people obeyed God's laws, then he would bless them in the land he was giving them. If not, then the Lord would punish them. God never intended this covenant to be the way to salvation, but rather he intended for this covenant to be a "hedge" around his people to set them apart from the pagan peoples around them. In that way, he would preserve the line of the coming Savior, but terrified they responded, ***"Everything the LORD has said we will do...We will obey."*** (Exodus 24:7)

It was only a matter of time, though, before they broke that covenant. While Moses lingered on the mountain, the people had a golden calf idol formed so they could worship it in disgusting revelry. The Lord punished their unfaithfulness and they repented, but that cycle of faithfulness and faithlessness became a pattern that repeated itself again and again in the years, decades, and centuries that followed.

Their unfaithfulness eventually led to the Old Covenant's failure. By Jeremiah's day, the future looked pretty bleak. The Lord had finally had enough. Judgment was coming, but the future wasn't bleak for everyone. God was going to establish a new covenant for the sake of the remnant. ***"It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.***

You see, in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, the Lord had preserved a remnant of people who remained faithful to the true God and trusted in his promises of a Savior to come. The Lord wanted them to know what he had waiting for them in the future—a future that started with the good news of his forgiveness. It would be a new covenant, but this really wasn't new. God's forgiveness through the Savior has always been around.

Yet this glimpse into their future would give those believers hope, strength, peace, and life amidst all the unfaithfulness around them. The Lord promised, ***"The time is coming... when I will make a new covenant.... This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."***

The Lord promised grace for his people. He would establish a covenant with them that was not based on obeying his Law or anything they would have to do, but based solely on the full and free forgiveness he would provide through the promised Messiah. Their future started with God's forgiveness.

That forgiveness sustained those believers through seventy long years of exile. That forgiveness sustained their descendants through four hundred years of silence after their return to Palestine, but then what God promised about their future became reality. God sent his Son Jesus to take on human flesh. His perfect life substituted for their unfaithfulness. His innocent blood was shed not on a mountain covered in fire and terror, but a hill covered in forgiveness flowing from a dying Savior hanging on a cross. His once-for-all sacrifice pleased God and removed sin's guilt forever. His sacrifice brought about complete salvation. His resurrection from the dead sealed that forgiveness forever.

That forgiveness came to God's people through faith in their Savior. The Lord promised to put his Word in their hearts and minds through faith in Jesus as the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 3, ***"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified (declared not guilty) freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*** Their future started with God's forgiveness.

The same was true for Martin Luther. For much of his life, that young monk had been tortured with guilt and fear of the angry God. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't do enough to please God. His future of an eternity in hell terrified him. Then a friend pointed him to the Word of God for help and comfort. Luther's study of God's Word opened his eyes to see the truth of God's grace through Jesus Christ. He learned about God's forgiveness—how he forgives our sins and remembers them no more. From pulpit and podium, Luther then began to proclaim that truth. We cannot be saved by our own works. We cannot be saved by buying or earning God's forgiveness. No, we are saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus alone as we find out in Scripture alone.

God completely changed Martin's future with forgiveness through Jesus. Luther wrote, ***"Forgiveness of sins...is not something which we earn for ourselves by our own good deeds. Rather, it is a free gift which God gives us as a result of all that Jesus did for us as our Savior. Salvation, therefore, is completely and only by faith in Jesus."*** Cleansed with Christ's blood, his sins were forgiven forever. Jesus was his Savior and friend. That good news of his sins forgiven through Christ lifted the burden of guilt off of Luther's shoulders and moved him to proclaim the good news of God's forgiveness that we still hear today.

So how does your future look? Are there times when your future looks bleak? Do you ever find yourself thinking you have to do something to please God or that the guilt of that sin really isn't so bad? Do you ever find yourself getting lazy in your faithfulness to the Lord or merely giving him lip service in your daily life? Do you find yourself dipping your toes (or more!) into the waters of unfaithfulness? Inside each of us is a sinful arrogance that thinks we can please God or that mere lip service is "good enough," but on our own, all we have is a bleak future of guilt and death.

Yet the Lord does not abandon you and me to guilt and eternal death. No, he gives you a new future—a future that starts with his forgiveness. ***"For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more."*** The truth is, God has to do everything to change your future. By grace, the Lord had to do the work to make you his own through the waters of Holy Baptism and the hearing of his Holy Gospel. By grace, the Lord did the work of forgiving you for those times when you have been unfaithful to him, when you have ignored his holy will, when you have depended on yourself. By grace, the Lord doesn't look at your sin anymore because he remembers forever what Jesus, his Son, gave up for you to restore your relationship with him—and so the Lord changes your future forever.

God gives you a new life and a new desire to serve him as you discover God's truth for your life through Holy Scripture. He makes it possible so you can walk through this life firmly grounded on Christ and motivated by his undying love for you. His forgiveness through Jesus is with you every step of the way. So you can look forward to a future where you will live in his perfect grace for eternity, yet it all starts with God's forgiveness. For the old remnant, their future started with God's forgiveness in the coming Messiah. For Luther and for us, our future starts with God's forgiveness fulfilled in our Savior Jesus Christ. My friends, if your future starts with God's forgiveness in Christ, then what a future it will be! Amen.