

I. Advanced Organizer -

- A. **Being confirmed.** Baptized as a kid in a mainline denominational church. And then as I was around 12 or 13, told it was time for confirmation. Along with all the other sixth graders, took a class. I always liked studying, but this was boring. Don't remember really learning anything about what I'd now call the Christian faith. Nothing about the Bible. Nothing about the trinity; Father Son, Holy Spirit. Nothing about how to connect with God, but a lot about the history of my particular denomination. At the end of the class, set up in front of the church, wear a nice dress and let the pastor put a bit of oil on each of our heads. Nothing special for me. I was probably thinking about if we might go out for pizza afterwards, like most of my friends. But there was one girl who wasn't like the rest of us. Something was happening for her. She kneeled and the pastor blessed her with oil, she was crying. Visibly moved. I didn't know what she was feeling but I knew it was something genuine. I wanted it, but I didn't understand where it came from.
- B. Years later, **saw this same dynamic up close as a youth worker** in a church that put a big emphasis on experiences of God through the Holy Spirit. Not everyone had positive experience. One young man-skeptical type. Super smart. Scientific mind. Eventually went to med school and then into software. Struggled watching a lot of the kids around him have emotional, powerful experiences. His girlfriend, regularly had powerful experiences, got "words of knowledge", but he didn't.
- C. Many of us may have had the experience of being an outsider looking into something someone else seems to be having:
1. Do you doubt the authenticity of the experience?
 - a) maybe some valid reasons for this
 - b) but to always have to doubt leaves little hope for faith with any power
 2. Do you conclude that the experience is real, but not for you?
 - a) maybe you're not lucky enough
 - b) maybe you aren't wired that way
 - c) God's not "calling" you
- D. Questions were going to be explored over the next six weeks. Are experiences of God's Spirit available to everyone? And if so, how do we get more from those?
- E. Throughout Lent: 40 Days of Interactive Faith. Exploring what it means to have powerful, interactive, experiential connections with God and how we each might press into more of them, as well as seeing more of them expressed in our community.

II. *Main text today: **Looking at a picture given to Jeremiah, the prophet***

- A. Background, context
1. OT - Just a few people had an experience of God's Spirit, the presence of God made manifest to humans. God's spirit came to great leaders like Moses. It came into the tabernacle or the temple in the innermost part, where one priest was allowed to go once a year. At times it came on particular artists as they designed these meeting places for God, and got blessed their artistry. It came on amazing leaders like David. It came to the prophets, who were commissioned by God to deliver his messages to his people, often messages they didn't want to hear.
 2. When God's Spirit came, things happened for those people. They were empowered. They were enlivened. But it was just them.
 3. But for most average folks living in Israel, connection to God didn't come through a spiritual experience, it came through obedience to the law and tradition. For them: God had given Moses the law, they followed it. And there was an understanding to it. This is the contract

we have with God - this is our Covenant (promise, contract, binding agreement). We follow the law, God will take care of us.

4. There were downsides to this approach. It's challenging to have relationship with a text, however divine it is. It's static, but you're not. Context shifts. Living by obedience is challenging. And God's people had a hard time with it. They struggled. While the law did point the people in a very helpful direction, and distinguish them from their neighbors, and the life they'd live before the law, as slaves in Egypt, the text alone couldn't bring personal transformation, and it couldn't bring intimacy with God. And without those things, a transformed heart, and an intimate connection with the God, the people often fell short. Eventually the falling short got so significant that there were major consequence. God removed his protection. There was war, and violence, and exile. But there were also pictures, inspired by the Spirit, spoken but the prophets of a time in the future, when things would not be the same.

B. Jeremiah 31:31-34:

***"The days are coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.***

***32 It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
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.***

***33 "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time," declares the Lord.***

***"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.***

***34 No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, '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 wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."***

1. In these words of Jeremiah, **God seems to be hinting that something new is coming.** That the experience of connection to God coming through following a set of codes isn't complete enough. That there would be something more personal and more experiential.

2. Point 1: **The new covenant is internal, not external.**

a) Not like the other covenant. Unique. Law in minds and hearts.

(1) Jeremiah wasn't the only one getting this kind of information.

(2) Ezekiel 36: 26-27: ***"I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put my Spirit within you; I will take the initiative and you will obey my statutes and carefully observe my regulations."***

- (a) It won't be blind obedience, it will be through a connected inner knowledge. A knowledge led by the Spirit of God. It will move through the hearts and minds of people, bringing transformation and intimacy that were lacking before. It'll move hearts. That experience my friend Kelly had: totally normal.
3. Point 2: **The new covenant is for everyone to fully experience, not just an elite few.**
- a) "they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest"
- b) Joel 2:28-29: ***““And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
29 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”***
- c) **democratization of the work of God.** Everyone has a role to play. The idea that daughters, women, would be as involved as men: revolutionary. Idea that it wasn't just the elders, but the young men, too: revolutionary.
- d) That's exactly what happened.
- (1) Pentecost. Spirit came on this group of Jewish followers of Jesus, and they all were worshipping in languages they'd never heard. Transcended racial and ethnic barriers. Peter, trying to interpret for those who are witnessing the miracle what is going on, feels inspired by the Spirit to reach for this passage. "This is the time Joel announced, a time when men and women, old and young would all give voice to God's Spirit."
- e) **I remember the first time I got that I was having a genuine spiritual experience,** perhaps in some way similar to my friend Kelly had years earlier.
- (1) As I've already alluded to, I attended mainline churches throughout my childhood, but my experience was not great. It certainly didn't leave me feeling like I'd found God, if there was one. What was really important to me from an early age was performing. If you want to know what I was like in high school, I was basically Rachel from Glee. My whole life was pointed toward being a Broadway star.
- (2) When I was a senior in high school, I was applying to and auditioning for a number of competitive theatre programs at various universities around the country. Because these programs were so competitive, and so much of their admissions were based on a two-minute audition, I applied to 16 schools, figuring I would go to one of the few I might get into. In the end, I was accepted into 12 of the 16: which was way more programs than I had expected! Feeling torn about the decision, and desperate to make a good one, I prayed with an intensity I never had before. I prayed something along the lines of "God, I don't know who you are or if you're real, but if you are, please show me where to go to school".
- (3) That winter and spring, I toured several different campuses, with Northwestern in Chicago being the last. I had already decided in my mind that I wanted to go to NYU in Manhattan (I mean, the school was only a stone's throw from Broadway!), but I agreed to tour Northwestern in order to pacify my parents' so they'd let me go to New York.
- (4) The trip to Chicago started horribly. We flew through the night and arrived in the wee hours of the morning. We didn't have a hotel yet so my mom and I spent three or four hours trying to sleep in a cold rental car - me, a wimpy girl from southern

- California who was not used to April in the midwest. By the time we drove to Northwestern I was cranky and cold and I just wanted the trip to be over.
- (5) However, no sooner did I step on the campus and begin to tour it, then I felt an unbelievable calm. I felt a peace I hadn't remembered feeling before, and I could see my life there in a strikingly vivid way. It was totally different than my experience at NYU or any other school. I was overwhelmed by the sense that "I believe there is a God, and I think He wants me to go here." I told my mother my mind was made up on the plane ride home, and I was Chicago-bound.
 - (6) After that initial experience, I came to campus open to discovering who this God was. However, culturally I was different than most of the folks who claimed to be Christians on campus, and I immediately felt that as a Southern California theatre chick, I did not fit in their worlds. So I hung with my theatre crowd at first, secretly wondering where God might be in my life.
 - (7) One day a senior theatre major came to our freshman theatre class and made an announcement before class. He said he was starting a group in the Arts dorm on campus for theatre people who wanted to talk about God. Immediately, I felt that same feeling I had experienced before when touring the campus again; tingles running through my body and a sense that someone intimate was remarkably present with me. My mind and heart were racing - this sounded like exactly what I was looking for. I spoke to the young man after class and he invited me to his small group - a group which I would later find out was affiliated with the Evanston Vineyard.
 - (8) That Thursday evening, I nervously made my way to the Arts dorm, wondering how easily I could escape if it was too weird or creepy. But as I attended that first small group meeting I knew that **I had found what I was looking for**. The leader guy picked up a guitar and started playing these simple, beautiful songs to Jesus. As I listened to the words and the melodies, I found myself crying in a room full of strangers. I wept all the way through the worship, and then sobbed as a small group of people laid hands on me and prayed for me for the first time. That night I began to understand who Jesus was, that I could relate to him personally, that he cared about me, deeply, even loved me, and that I could experience the presence of his spirit in a vivid, transforming way that I'd been hungry for for a long time. This wasn't just a one way-thing. This God was interacting with me. Faith was a two-way exchange. And I didn't have to know anything to find that. I knew nothing about the Bible really. I understood so little, and yet God was so present. It changed the entire trajectory of my life. Going on twenty years later, I have no doubt that it was for the better.
 - f) John Wimber was the catalytic leader who helped found a movement of churches that nurtured me in my faith for many years, and out of which grew our Blue Ocean movement. He was a big believer in experience of God's spirit because he saw the democratization of access to God at work. He had a phrase that characterized so much of how he understood participation in God's work of ministry: "Everybody gets to play." Nobody's left out. There's no special access for the folks with the graduate degrees. The Spirit falls equally on the young and old, the man and the woman, the powerful and the vulnerable, and everybody gets to play.
4. Point 3: **The new covenant is rooted not in our perfection, but in grace and forgiveness; a forgiveness anchored in the work of Jesus.**
- a) The new covenant seems to be rooted in forgiveness. Connection to God is no longer maintained through sinlessness. "God will remember the sins of his people no more," it

says. Instead, connection to God through the new covenant comes through the Spirit. Jesus, and his work on the cross satisfied the demands of the old covenant.

- b) Maybe you've heard these words, "New Covenant" before. Maybe they sound familiar, even if you've never read this passage of Jeremiah.

(1) When we introduce communion I recite this message Paul had written in 1

Corinthians 11: ***"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."***

- c) Jesus offered himself up to fulfill the old covenant so he could usher in a new one. And he invited us to come again and again to a communion table to remember this grace, remember this gift, remember that we stand under a new kind of contract. This contract is not centered in performance of worth and holiness, but love: God's love for his people, our love for him, and our living love toward one another. Jesus in his life and death and resurrection demonstrates a life animated by these things and empowered by the presence of God's Spirit.
- d) Jesus lived a life that modeled what it means to be empowered by the spirit. (Remember the dove coming on him at his baptism.) It was as if God wanted it to be super-evident that the Spirit of God animated Jesus' work. And when Jesus' work was reaching an end, he promised to send that same Spirit to his people. He told them not to try to do anything until they'd gotten it. That the Spirit is what would empower them. That is what would send them forth. Without it, they were hopeless, but with it, they had access to a whole new kind of powerful way of living and connecting with the Divine.

III. The new covenant is internal, it is for everyone, and it is rooted in grace. If this is true, it should mean that all of us have access to a two-way kind of faith. It's not a faith that we have to go to a certain place to find, or study certain books to discover. It's something all of us could have as part of our everyday life.

- A.** We're going to be exploring this in the weeks to come, not only through our Sunday teachings, but through our daily activities throughout the week. My hope is that throughout the coming weeks, all of us will have some new experiences, that expand our repertoire with God and help us have more hope in pursuing faith, wherever we might start.
- B.** To make space for these things to happen, 4 invitations for these 40 days, that will help make room for some New Covenant experiences.
 - 1. Engage with the Daily Guide
 - 2. Pray every day
 - 3. Consider some sort of fast.
 - 4. Gather with the like-minded.
- C.** Take a moment to tell God where you are and what you would like to see during these next 40 days? What's on your heart? What are you longing for? (Moment of silence)
- D.** Pray for Holy Spirit. Encourage folks to listen to what God might be saying to us.