

**Meeting God Today**  
**Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**  
**NPMC - Nov. 13, 2022**

**Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 5:39-47**

**Hymns: VT 377 – New Earth, Heavens New; 636 – Spirit, Open My Heart; 420 – God of the Bible; 537 – Lord, You Sometimes Speak**

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

<sup>31</sup> The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says 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. <sup>34</sup> No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

**Matthew 9:14-17**

<sup>14</sup> Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” <sup>15</sup> And Jesus said to them, “The wedding attendants cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. <sup>16</sup> No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. <sup>17</sup> Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are ruined, but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

When you have a family gathering, what are the stories that get told over and over? Do you have any that cause controversy as various relatives remember them slightly differently, and they start to debate around the table? These can be funny disagreements (“no, the fish uncle Jake caught was THIS long!”) or more serious ones (how did aunt Sarah cope with the loss of her young husband?). But then, what happens when a family member decides to write their memoirs? Suddenly, the family lore is printed and bound, and debate about the stories becomes, effectively, irrelevant.

What's written down becomes what's remembered, because it's on paper in black and white.

There was a time when the Bible went through this kind of shift. What had been held in oral stories, passed down in face-to-face tellings, debated as a living story that was still unfolding, became a written text. Significantly, it was during the exile of the Israelites in Babylon (starting in 586 BCE) that this process from spoken to written word began, as the exiles wanted to make sure to preserve their sacred stories in a time when their identity as Israelites was being challenged by the Babylonian Empire. Even if they didn't make it back to the land of Israel, they wanted to make sure the stories survived. So they wrote them down in scrolls. The thing is, it becomes that much more difficult to debate with a scroll....

In his book we've been using *How the Bible Actually Works*, Bible scholar Peter Enns talks about pros and cons to this shift from oral storytelling to written text in terms of our understanding of the Bible (and how it works). He writes, "Ironically, *the thing that threatened ancient Israel's existence, the exile, led to the creation of a sacred book that ensured Israel's survival* .... Jews would become the 'people of the book,' and that book has helped carry their tradition forward much farther than I'm sure any Jews would have imagined some twenty-five hundred years ago.... On the other hand, 'putting it in writing' would also create several metric tons of challenges, all of which can be summed up as follows: once you put the sacred tradition in writing, it is less a living tradition and more locked into a time gone by."<sup>1</sup> While the Jewish tradition has commentaries (called the Talmud) that have kept up the practice of "midrash" or this kind of faithful theological

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works: In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather than Answers – and Why That's Great News* (New York: Harper One, 2019), 171.

debate and ‘wrestling’ with the text, certain branches of Christianity have frowned upon or even outright forbidden that kind of interaction with Scripture! Some of us have forgotten that the Bible “is more like a living organism than a carved tablet.”<sup>2</sup> Or, to put it differently, we’ve forgotten that the canon of Scripture is not really ‘closed,’ not really exclusively limited to what’s printed and bound.

But if we read the Bible carefully and attentively, we see that what it preserves is precisely this ***faith-as-theological-conversation-or-debate about who God is, how people in the past recognized God, and how we can recognize God today.*** Enns gives this great example of the two different versions of the same moment in history that we have in: I and II Samuel and I and II Kings, on the one hand, and I and II Chronicles on the other. These books tell the same story from the time of Israel’s first king, Saul, to the Babylonian exile. But they don’t tell it in the same way! We might turn to historians or archaeologists and wonder which one is the “real” or “true” version. But neither version was interested in telling straight-up factual history (a very modern idea from the past 200 years or so). Instead, they were interested in answering two different theological questions. The Samuel and Kings version, according to Enns, tries to answer the questions, “How did we get into this mess? What did we do to deserve exile?” The Chronicles version, however, was written a few centuries later, and asked “After all this time, is God still with us?”<sup>3</sup> You see, by then, the longed-for return from exile had happened, and yet, it was kind of underwhelming. Enns says, “It’s good to be back in the promised land, but centuries had passed since Judah last had a king on the throne. When will God restore them to their former glory?! When will they once again

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<sup>2</sup> Enns, 167.

<sup>3</sup> Enns, 107-108.

experience God’s favour and blessing?! ... ‘How much longer do we have to wait for a sign that God hasn’t abandoned us?’”<sup>4</sup> This new question led to a new telling of this part of Israelite history, and we have kept both versions within our Scriptures. This example therefore models for us, says Enns, “the normalcy of seeking the presence of God for ourselves in our here and now.”<sup>5</sup> It shows us, as Bible scholar Jaime Clark Soles puts it, that “We question the text and the text questions us.”<sup>6</sup>

Our Scripture passage from Jeremiah 31 is another of those examples that shows us that the Bible points beyond itself. The prophet Jeremiah speaks here about the future restoration of Israel after the time of exile, the time of returning to the land and re-establishing themselves as a nation. This section of the book is called the “Book of Comfort” (Jer. 30-33), and describes the mending of the broken covenant between God and the people.<sup>7</sup> What I find remarkable (especially for a biblical passage) is that it speaks in glowing terms of a time when the Bible will no longer be needed. It will be irrelevant to the people. They will have no need for its scrolls or tablets or anything written because the law of God will be “within” everyone, written “on their hearts.” God says, “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.”<sup>34</sup> No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (v. 33-34). Now, I don’t think we’re meant to take this in a Sunday-school-type-

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<sup>4</sup> Enns, 111.

<sup>5</sup> Enns, 113.

<sup>6</sup> Jaime Clark Soles, “Disability and the Johannine Literature,” Video, 1:01:39, published March 22, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNEQsgorCmU&ab\\_channel=CollaborativeonFaithandDisability](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNEQsgorCmU&ab_channel=CollaborativeonFaithandDisability)

<sup>7</sup> See Callie Plunket-Brewton, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/reformation-day/commentary-on-jeremiah-3131-34-19>

of-way, where we're to have the whole Bible memorized and know it all "by heart"! As useful as that is for Bible quizzing, there's something more going on here. Remember that in Hebrew, to speak of one's heart was to speak of understanding and decision-making. In Jeremiah 31, the people have internalized God's laws or God's ways of justice and peace to the point that they don't need the written version anymore. They've become God's people, people of Wisdom, people of justice and peace. And no one needs the Bible to teach each other to know God, because they all already know God. I find it fascinating that this is identified as the whole point of Scripture here: it's a window through which we glimpse God. The point is not to worship the window itself, but to learn how to look for God, and to meet God in our world today.

The early Anabaptists of the 16<sup>th</sup> century had a very interesting way of understanding this. They often spoke of the Spirit and the letter of Scripture, or the "inner and outer Word" of God.<sup>8</sup> So while mainline Protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin were talking about "sola Scriptura" (by Scripture alone), "Anabaptists taught 'Scripture and Spirit, together,'" says historian Arnold Snyder.<sup>9</sup> The "Anabaptists insisted that the Holy Spirit had to be active in the interpretation of the letter. So, for example, a spiritually enlightened peasant would be a more reliable interpreter of Scripture than was a professor of biblical languages who lacked the Spirit."<sup>10</sup> In a way, this makes sense in their situation of church corruption. They had heard corrupt preachers give all kinds of sermons presumably based on Scripture. As Patrick reminded us last week, the Bible contains all kinds of profoundly questionable calls to

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<sup>8</sup> To read more about this, see [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Bible: Inner and Outer Word](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Bible: Inner_and_Outer_Word)

<sup>9</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: Exploring the Historical Center of Anabaptist Teachings and Practices* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007), 10.

<sup>10</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 25.

violence and justifications of oppression. So if it's not the Bible itself that transforms us, the early Anabaptists reasoned, it must be the Bible PLUS a living relationship, an ongoing encounter with the Spirit of God, which gives us eyes to see ourselves and the world in a new way. So early Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hubmaier wrote, "The Word of God is water to all those who thirst for salvation and is made alive in us through the Spirit of God, without whose work it is only a dead letter."<sup>11</sup> Unless it's written on our hearts and incarnate in our lives, the Bible is just an ancient, weird book.

Now as you know, this is the last sermon in our series on Making Sense of the Bible, and I want to acknowledge that we've talked a lot about how complicated the Bible is and I've used the word "reimagine" a lot. I hope it doesn't seem like I've given us a lot of homework, or made it seem like we have to throw out everything we thought about the Bible before and start from scratch. That's a lot of pressure! Some of the good news that Peter Enns raises again and again is that this reimagining is already happening in Scripture and we are already doing it today. We do this kind of reimagining all the time – just without maybe realizing that's what we're doing.

Jesus talks about this in terms of the new and the old. In Matthew 13:52, he says, "to be trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." Whenever we read the Bible or hear it read, whether in a Bible study, in personal prayer or devotions, in a worship service or sermon (like right now!), we are already bringing together the old and the new. We are already participating in this ancient tradition of past voices of faithful

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<sup>11</sup> See "Bible: Inner and Outer Word," paragraph 2, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Bible: Inner and Outer Word](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Bible:_Inner_and_Outer_Word)

people speaking to our time and place, our pressing questions and issues.<sup>12</sup> We're already interpreting and reimagining the ancient text as it speaks to us. So Enns says, "We are not simply maintaining the past; we are transforming it, again and again."<sup>13</sup> That's how we keep it alive.

Let me give two brief examples: today is Peace Sunday, a day when we who belong to peace churches remember all of the victims of war and violence and recommit to be people of peace. This commitment involves bringing together the old and the new. On one hand, it takes seriously Jesus' call to love one's enemies, be peacemakers, and overcome evil with good (Matt. 5; Luke 6). But the way in which we live that out is not going to be the same as it was when Jesus first uttered those words. The "old treasure" of Jesus' teachings is brought into conversation with "new treasures" of applying the call to make peace in new ways today – through supporting restorative justice, advocating for affordable housing, being a welcoming and 2SLGBTQ+ affirming community, working for truth and reconciliation among settlers and Indigenous peoples. What Enns has said all along is that we're meant to take that leap from the ancient world to apply the text to our world in new ways. That's the faithful thing to do.

But this also gives us the freedom to let go of things in Scripture that no longer give life. Two weeks ago, when Don Klaassen asked Anita Retzlaff to read the Scripture from 1 Corinthians 14 about women being silent in the churches, what was our response in the congregation? We laughed! (And can I just say, that was a very moving moment for me as a woman in ministry!) We laughed. We didn't cower before these ancient words from our Bible and say, well, I guess we've been wrong for 30 years,

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<sup>12</sup> See Enns, 156 and 277.

<sup>13</sup> Enns, 196.

women aren't supposed to be church leaders! No, instead, we let go of the authority of these words because we have experienced the leadership gifts of women and non-binary people in our congregation! We have glimpsed God at work in the congregational and pastoral leadership of people of all genders, so we can let go of this old teaching. This is what Jesus talks about when he speaks of old things – cloth and wineskins – that are unable to hold the new without falling apart (Matt. 9). We're meant to let them go. That's the faithful thing to do.

The question that always remains, of course, is when we are supposed to hang onto ancient teachings and when we are supposed to let go – a question that is, quite intentionally, left up to our wisdom and discernment. But we're not alone in this. We have a whole Wisdom Community (the church) with whom to wrestle with these ancient texts and the new meanings and blessing they hold for us. As we wrestle together, we can help each other remember that “Wisdom leads us to dialogues with the past. It doesn't lead us back to the past.”<sup>14</sup> And in this wrestling, I'm sure we will glimpse the presence and face of Wisdom in ourselves, in each other, and in our world – just as our biblical forbears did so long ago. AMEN

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<sup>14</sup> Enns, 275.