

Biblical scholars commonly call chapters 30-31 in Jeremiah, "The Book of Comfort." They are a collection of promises from Yahweh to the Hebrew people in exile which faithful Jews learned for comfort in their despair and to restore the community in their covenantal relationship with the Lord.

### Jeremiah 31:31-34

"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. 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 husband to them, declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the house 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. No longer will a ~~man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord"~~ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" declares the Lord.

### The Burden of Passion

Our scripture reading is a writing from the prophet Jeremiah to the Hebrew people in exile. As captive people with a deep desire to live and survive in a foreign land---they had passionately embraced the ways of the surrounding culture. The good news was that enculturation helped them assimilate and adapt to a new situation. The bad news was that they fell into spiritual despair. Away from home, family, and organized religious life, they had lost passion for the hopes and dreams of Israel's God. In the A Gate Called Truth, poet Ann Weems unearths what it may have been like for them.

*Just outside Jerusalem we came to a gate called Truth.*

*We called to the gatekeeper to let us in.*

*"The latch is not on," he replied. "Anyone who will can enter."*

*We went closer, but seeing how great and how heavy was the gate,*

*We looked for a way around. There must be a way around.*

(Ann Weems from *Kneeling in Jerusalem*, p. 63)

According to the Bible, the most effective way that covenantal people of faith in every generation have found to get around their commitment to Love and serve the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength is idolatry. Idolatry is the passionate worship of anything or anyone other than Yahweh. Because it is rooted in the soul's passion for life and need of human love, idolatry takes the spark out of every person's commitment of faith.

*"Funny Isn't It"* from the World Collection of Church Jokes gives a good feel of what idolatry is like for us.

Funny, isn't it? Funny how tiring it is to serve God for one hour,  
but how quickly a team plays sixty minutes of basketball.

Funny how long a couple of hours spent at church are,  
but how short they are when watching a movie.

Funny how we can't think of anything to say when we pray,  
but how easy it is to chat with a friend.

Funny how thrilled we get when a baseball game goes extra innings,  
but we complain when a sermon is longer than usual.

Funny how we want a front seat at a game or concert  
but scramble to get a back seat at church.

Funny how we need a two or three-week notice to fit a church event  
into our schedule,

but can adjust our schedule at the last minute for other events.

Funny how big one hundred dollars looks when you take it to church  
but it's so small at the mall.

Funny how hard is it to read a chapter in the bible,  
but how easy it is to read one hundred pages in a best seller.

Funny how hard it is for people to learn a simple plan of salvation,  
but how simple it is for the same people to understand and repeat  
gossip.

(World's Greatest Collection of Church Jokes, p. 119-220)

Truth is, there is no limit to the ways in which we do "I'd rather be fishing" instead of doing the hard work of opening up faith's gate for a deeper knowing of God.

According to Biblical scholars, knowledge of the Lord held specific meaning in Jeremiah's offer of covenant renewal to the exiled people in need of comfort. **Knowing the Lord means deep, trustful intimacy. Knowing the Lord means acknowledgment of a sovereign authority over all of life. Knowing the Lord means obedience that is congruent with the will and character of Yahweh . . . Where knowing God consists of caring for "the poor and needy." Taken all together, knowing God means ceding over all of one's life to the claims and insistences of God as the truth of our own life** (Texts for Preaching, Year B, p. 232).

An unexpected thing happened to Yahweh's exiled people of faith. Instead of seeking the truth of their life through passionate knowing of the Torah---they got heavy into idolatry. What they needed to re-learn was how to remain faithful by committing themselves to the new covenant offered to them by the Lord. So Yahweh promised God's people: | will put my law within them, and | will write it on their hearts; and | will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jeremiah 31:33b). *But what then, theologian Fred Craddock asks, is new about the new covenant? That God initiates the covenant, that God forgives sins, and that Israel and Judah will "know" God intimately had been features of older covenants. What is without precedent is the law written on the heart --- the covenant at the core of one's (willful) being. . . Which laws, then, are written on the heart? All*

*the laws of Moses? Just the Decalogue? The answer is all of these things, and none of them. Just these words will suffice: "I am yours, and you are mine," says (God). That is the language of love and faithfulness* (Fred Craddock, *Imaging the Word*, p. 176- 177). "I am yours and you are mine" is the language that increased their passion for the Lord, threw wide open the gate of faith, and made them forget to look for another way around.

A traditional Lenten way for diminishing our passion for our idols is to fast or to 'give something up' . . . and to take on a spiritual practice to comfort us in our time of denial. Today's scripture suggests that we take up praying for a deeper knowing of God's promise that "I am yours and you are mine."

This Lent I am keeping to a fast of 1200 calories a day to smash my addiction to my COMFORT FOOD IDOL. Now because God ~~makes good on all~~ of God's promises to us . . . I'll end with a "Funny Isn't It?" poem that I wrote about the comfort and spiritual renewal I received as I took into my heart God's will to care for the poor and needy.

*Isn't it funny?*

*Funny how I know*

*that cheese, spaghetti, and ice cream are my comfort food,  
but how uncomfortable I feel after getting my fill.*

*Funny how I know*

*most people don't get the food they are entitled to,  
but how easy it is for me to feel entitled to eat as much as I want.*

*Funny how when I know*

*that "I am yours and you are mine"  
eating more than my fair share no longer seems fine.*