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Jeremiah 31:31-34, New Living Translation, slightly abbreviated.

³¹ *“The day is coming,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. ³² This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt.*

³³ *“But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days,” says the LORD. “I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, ‘You should know the LORD.’ For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already,” says the LORD. “And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.”*

Hebrews 8:6–9, 13, New Living Translation.

⁶ *But now Jesus, our High Priest, has been given a ministry that is far superior to the old priesthood, for he is the one who mediates for us a far better covenant with God, based on better promises.*

⁷ *If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant to replace it. ⁸ But when God found fault with the people, he said:*

*“The day is coming, says the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel and Judah.*

⁹ *This covenant will not be like the one
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
and led them out of the land of Egypt.*

¹³ *When God speaks of a “new” covenant, it means he has made the first one obsolete. It is now out of date and will soon disappear.*

The day is coming.

The New Testament is packed with references to the Old, and there are many references in the Old Testament that seem to prophesize events in the New. On this Christmas Eve, I'd like to look at a powerful parallel between the Old and the New Testament, one that foretells of the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, from the Mosaic covenant between God and the Israelites, and the one between each of us personally and Jesus Christ. The Book of Jeremiah covers a watershed period of Israelite history. This is the period leading up to and including the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 587 B.C., and the exile of many of Israel's elite eastward into the heart of the Babylonian empire. The Book of Jeremiah is haphazardly engineered, and it's clearly pulled together from multiple sources. It doesn't even present a consistent chronological ordering of events. And its development seems to have continued for long after the death of Jeremiah himself. Jeremiah came from a priestly family living near Jerusalem. He was well educated, and the book makes a very sophisticated use of Hebrew. God informs Jeremiah in a vision that he had been chosen to be a future prophet way back when he was still within his mother's womb. He is called by God to serve as a prophet when he is still a very young man, but at first, he resists. He later expresses contempt for people who don't understand the gravity of the position

of a prophet. Jeremiah spends forty years trying to warn the sinful people of Judah, the southern part of Israel, which contained Jerusalem, that if they do not heed God's word and end their morally corrupt ways, God will bring destruction to them. His family turns on him. He never marries. He is whipped, put in the stocks, and attacked by a mob. He is thrown in jail. God's punishment to God's people does indeed come – in the form of the Babylonian invasion. Jeremiah himself is not exiled, but he does write to the exiles, warning them that God isn't going to let them return home for a very long time.

Our first quote, which comes from Chapter 31 of Jeremiah is referenced multiple times in the New Testament, including the Gospel of Luke, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, and in our second passage today, from Hebrews. It comes after a part of the Book of Jeremiah, where the prophet, based on a dream of his, predicts that one day, Jerusalem will be restored. Importantly, the passage that we're looking at isn't a prediction of a future people of faith, of a land far beyond Israel, of a time far away in the future. Jeremiah is talking about immediate, Earthly restoration, not the spiritual restoration that is embodied in the New Testament. When he talks about a "new covenant", he refers to a rebuilding of Jerusalem after the destruction by the Babylonians. Jeremiah tells a separated,

crushed, dispirited people who think that God has utterly rejected them that they will come alive again. Jeremiah offers worldly hope to his people when he says:

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³³ “But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days,” says the LORD. “I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, ‘You should know the LORD.’ For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already,” says the LORD. “And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.”

But this passage took on new meaning when Jesus came into the world. We don't know who wrote the letter that is now called the Book of Hebrews. In fact, it wasn't even labeled as a letter to “Hebrews” until the second century, long after the letter was written. The title simply expresses the obvious fact that it is clearly directed at Jews who are followers of Jesus. At this point in the letter, the author is arguing that Jesus has given us a new covenant, one that is superior to the older covenant, the one delivered to Moses by God on a mountain, and then passed on by Moses to God's people just before they enter the promised land. It's not that the Old Covenant is bad or wrong. It is simply dated; it is no longer relevant. The New Covenant isn't a set of worldly promises between God and God's people, like the Old Covenant, saying that God will give them their own land to live on, and

many generations of children to fill that land, and God's blessing on the People of God – and says they will get all that, but only if they live by God's laws. Rather, our covenant is internal - and it is eternal. Jesus has come to Earth and Jesus has left the Earth: and now, Jesus, standing in Heaven next to God, is our connection with a heavenly, spiritual covenant, one that guarantees us not earthly rewards, but rewards that last forever. Primary among these is God's promise to always forgive, to never remember our sins, and to never abandon us. While Jeremiah was really referring to a new version of the Old Covenant, a new promise by God to forgive the past evils of God's people and reward them on Earth, the author of Hebrews, like the authors of the Gospels, and like Paul, the author of so much of the New Testament, looks back at this prophesy of Jeremiah and sees something new:

*"The day is coming, says the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.
⁹ This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt.*

In the Gospel of Mark, after John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus declares: *"The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near!"*

This is the reason we celebrate Christmas, why this is such a magnificent season for us. Each of us has a personal relationship with God. We have indeed arrived in the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom is here, it's now, and it is also for all

of eternity. That is why we are so excited about the arrival of Jesus, because that birth means for us a spiritual, heavenly, and eternal walk in the Kingdom of God. We have so much more than the people of the Old Covenant had. We're not looking for the rebuilding of some earthly empire: we are being given an eternal empire in which we can live, starting right now.

I went to a Catholic school. In the sixth grade, I was given the honor of playing the boy Jesus in the school play. Now, I admit it wasn't because I was the best actor or because I was so holy. I got the job simply because I was the only kid who could memorize all the lines. I was told I had to wear a robe, which seemed to me to look like a dress – so I wore shorts under it. All that we know of Jesus comes from the Bible. And we don't know much about the boyhood of Jesus, other than that he wandered off at one point, and his stunned earthly parents found their little boy preaching to adults in the Temple. I don't remember what sorts of stories my sixth-grade play added to the story of the boy Jesus. But I do remember being on that stage and having the honor of representing that as-yet unfulfilled potential of changing the world, not physically, but spiritually, by giving us all the gift of living now and for all eternity with God, of truly living out that incredible blessing of being made in the image of God. We celebrate Jesus today because he gives us a New Jerusalem and it isn't some limited, temporary human kingdom. Amen!