“An Offer We Cannot Refuse”
A sermon by Rev Sue Strachan based on Jeremiah 31:27-34
Wolcott Congregational Church
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“The days are surely coming, when...” says the Lord. Sounds like a threat doesn't it? Sounds
like, “Just wait until your father gets home!” Well, according to our scripture, when our Father,
God, gets home, he is going to fill the land with people and all the animals and supplies needed
for a good life. When our Father, God, get’s home, he is going to make a new covenant with us;
God’s going to make us an offer we cannot refuse. And in Jeremiah’s time God’s offer is such an
amazing word of hope and comfort for God’s people. They have seen their holy city destroyed;
the government toppled and its leaders killed. They have seen their homes reduced to rubble,
family members captured, and friends and neighbors hauled off to a foreign land as prisoners.
They had come to believe that it was all because they had not done as God would have them
do; all because of their sinful ways and their disobedience. They had no reason to believe that
they could be restored as a people, a nation, a community of faith, as God’s people. They had
been warned for generations that this would happen. They had heard and seen the results of
the Northern Kingdom’s destruction for the very same reasons. They deserved everything they
had gotten. They had not paid attention to the prophets of old saying, “The days are surely
coming when...” says the Lord. Instead they had chosen their own ways and followed
whatever pleased them at the moment; the latest fad and fashion craze – the latest god who
required very little and promised much!

The words read to us this morning were preceded by a dream, a vision of God restoring his
people, the cities and the land. I wish we had time to read the whole chapter, for it is full of
rejoicing, full of life-giving promises, and full of asking for God’s forgiveness. Our passage begins
just after the one dreaming writes, “Thereupon I awoke and looked, and my sleep was pleasant
to me.” It was all a pleasant dream. But, now awake, the promises continue, it is prophecy, a
reality born out of God’s word! “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow... build...
plant...” God says, “I was there, watching over them, in the times to pluck up, break
down, destroy, and bring evil...and I will be watching over you now.” This is similar to the
language we use in marriage. As a matter of fact, God is referred to in this passage as being like
a husband to his people; the relationship is to be as intimate, as loving, as faithful, as sustaining
as those entering into marriage, you know “for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, for
better or worse, until death does us part.” The good news in our partnership with God is that
not even death ends the covenant relationship.

There is a proverb in verse 29 which God says will no longer be in play, it is no longer part of
the deal. The proverb states that “the parents have eaten the sour grapes and the children’s teeth
are set on edge.” But God says, “No more.” No longer will the children have to suffer for what
the parents have done. Each one will pay for his or her own sins. This is a huge promise, a much
needed promise, an OMG if it could only be promise for in our world violence begets violence,
criminality does too. Crack and heroine addicted infants are born every day, as are those
infected with AIDS. Most adult abusers had been abused as children. Unwanted pregnancies
too often result in unwanted babies who then become neglected or abandoned. But those are the worse cases, the ones we may feel able to do little about. If the days are coming when all of this will be prevented, then they cannot come too soon! What about you and me? How much do our children suffer from our poor decisions, our desires, our selfishness and greed? What are the sins which last beyond our own generation? What do our children learn from us? From the language we use? The laws we break? The drink we drink? The food we eat? The shows we watch? The games we play? If the days are coming soon, maybe we had better straighten out our lives and our priorities and our behaviors, and our hearts.

Of course we aren’t any worse than any other generation, are we? It seems to me that the world has not changed very much since the beginning of civilization. We humans have been choosing to live outside of God’s law from time immemorial. We say one thing and do another; we know all too well what the Apostle Paul was saying when he admitted that he cannot do what he wills to do and indeed does “the very thing he does not want.” It happens again and again. “The days are coming,” says the Lord.” Bring them on, God. We need a brand new day and a brand new way of living. Let us pray that the innocent child will be able to remain innocent and grow into caring, faithful, mature adults without suffering from our mistakes, without paying the price for us, without, as the scripture said, “having their teeth set on edge” because of what we have done, the wild, sour grapes we have sown and eaten.

God says that he will make a new covenant, not like the old one when he brought the people out of Egypt; not like the old one which the people broke! Do you remember that one? That was the Ten Commandments; you know the one written on stone tablets which Moses threw down the mountain in a rage when he saw the people’s worship of the golden calf; the covenant broken literally, physically, and spiritually then and each and every day of our history and our lives. No, this new one will not be like that. God says, “This time, I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” God says, “I will put my law” (not laws), my teaching, my revelation within each one of us.” And, God says, “I will write it on their heart.” We must remember this is a personal and communal covenant. We are not alone, an island unto our selves. We are a people, God’s people. That is the covenant promise God makes and although a covenant requires two parties, like a contract does, God is making and signing both sides. God says, “I will be their God and they shall be my people!” We will be God’s people, not because we asked to be, but because God wills it to be so. It is what God wants more than anything else – an intimate, personal and communal relationship with each of us and all of us.

God will put God’s law within us and write it on our hearts, on our hearts where our true decisions are made. And when God’s law is written there, we will know God; we won’t have to be taught or cajoled, or commanded; we will just know, from the inside out. This is the most intimate action that can possibly take place; to know is the Hebrew word ‘yada” used for that special knowledge between siblings, best friends and particularly intimacy between husband and wife. It is that “I knew you were going to say that” kind of knowing, when you understand the other person’s needs and ways, and desires and no words need to be exchanged in order to be fully understood and cared for. This is what God intends for us, to know God in the fullness of God’s love, tenderness, and mercy.
How will this kind of knowing come about? God says, “They all shall know me from the least of them to the greatest; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” Forgiveness is what God is to be known for, undeserved grace in the face of our sinfulness and all that is required of us is that we let God be God and accept the fact that we belong to him. Ernest Hemingway was known for telling this story. A father and his son had been estranged for some time, both felt that they had tried everything. The son had run away. Finally the father decided the only way to get rid of the pain and anguish was to forgive his son and offer a brand new start. He put an ad in the local paper, “Paul, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven! Dad.” When Tuesday came and the father went to the hotel, there were 1000 young men, all named Paul, waiting, hoping to receive the forgiveness of their father. It is our greatest need - to know God as a forgiving Father to his children; to really know God and trust in his love for each of us. God is writing his law on our heart so that we can know God is our God. And I believe tattooed there, also is this message, “This person belongs to me. If lost, please return her. Love, God.” With this new covenant God has certainly made an offer we cannot refuse. It comes with more than a lifetime guarantee, signed sealed and delivered by none other than God’s only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. We belong to God, plain and simple. We are God’s forgiven people; it’s written on our heart. Amen.