My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Lenten Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

“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.” And so God declares that God will be writing himself into us, according to Jeremiah. In Sunday School growing up, we were taught to “let Jesus into our hearts.” How about you? (take all answers). There’s even a famous painting of a tall Jesus in a white robe, knocking at a wooden door. In our minds’ eye, we finish the story that Jesus stands there patiently and knocks, waiting as long as it takes, and when we were ready, we will open the door wide and invite him in. Isn’t that nice?

This scripture is NOT that Sunday School teaching, that painting, and that story we want. The God of Jeremiah isn’t having any of that. This God is tired of people’s inability to keep the laws and covenants he’s given. This covenant isn’t a reminder to God about promises. This covenant isn’t about salving an old man’s worry about prosperity, estates, and succession. This covenant won’t be written in stone that could be lost in war or broken up into pieces. Instead, God will write this covenant on his people’s heart. In the Hebrew God does not refer to “hearts” but says “I will write it on their heart.” The heart of a single entire people will bear the covenant. This will be no privatized reformation of individual lives. But it also ensures that the community, however many in number and wherever they are, will be bound by what God has given—remember, that’s covenant in God’s view.

Not that people were asking for this new covenant. No one in Jeremiah’s day was speaking sweetly of “letting God into” their heart. There is no hint of an invitation on the part of the people. As Walter Brueggemann points out, this covenant is given by God without reason or explanation. I give, says God. Period, the end. By the way, this is good for you, too. So there. God wants the relationship with the people and resolves to have it. So God declares the following: God will write himself into the people.

Notice that although many of the surrounding passages are written as poetry, this text is written as plain prose. It is expressed not in high-flown language but as a down-to-earth matter-of-fact promise. It is going to happen—“The days are surely coming, says the Lord”—whether the people invite it or not. And though the image of God writing “my people” on the heart of the people is a compelling one, it also has a frightening aspect to it. You’ll alllll have identity beyond circumcision. Because this isn’t a choice.

What does this even mean? Think of a tattoo. Tattoos are more or less permanent. To get rid of a tattoo involves painful surgery that leaves a scar. A scar can be removed through costly laser surgery, sure, but let’s leave that aside. Have any of you ever been to a tattoo parlor? They show you all the pretty catalogs of intricate designs, and chat you up about how this one or that one is a specialty. They warn you to be sure that you want the mark you’re getting and to consider it permanent.

Whatever symbol a person chooses says something about him or her. That’s why tattoos are chosen in the first place—as a mark of identity. An Olympian sports a set of Olympic rings. Lovers put each other’s names on their bodies. Crosses and fishes get on the arms and chests of a lot of folks, too. When I see a tattoo on someone, it usually indicates something significant in their life, not just a regretted blackout drunk night like in the movie, “The Hangover”. I wonder what that tattoo marks for them?

So tattoos involve pain, permanence, and identity. These are the central aspects of what it means to be marked. If it didn’t involve pain, it wouldn’t be indelible. Marks that don’t hurt are the ones easily washed off. If it weren’t permanent, what it reveals about the person wouldn’t be so critical. Tattoo your arm with the name of your lover in your 20s, and you better still be with them 30 years later.

See where I’m going with this? OK, at this point we’re at that moment again where it needs to be said again. So here goes.

Pain, permanence and identity are also the hallmarks of God writing the covenant on the heart of the people. This is from a part of the scripture that is called “the little book of comfort”, because it’s supposed to calm our nerves and worry. But the pain of God inscribing himself into our souls must not be romanticized. God is invading our hearts, like it or not. Yes, this will make us God’s people, but it will also mean a death to our egotistical selves that shut out all change, events, and people that don’t serve our wants. God’s landing in our hearts is a radical transfer of allegiance from all systems and claims. This is not the people overcoming their sinful natures; this is God overcoming the people.

And in that sense, this tattoo cannot be removed by laser surgery. It’s as permanent as any brand. Although laws written in stone can be broken and put aside, God’s covenant in our hearts is, should be, and its promises are more enduring. God’s hold on us cannot be erased without cutting out a part of ourselves.

Does that help?

Let me leave you with these final thoughts.

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord.” Clearly they aren’t here yet, or else we wouldn’t still need reformation. The problem is still and always the same—our faulty hearts. No outer structure is the solution, only God written on our beings. This is a vision not of individual piety, but of a community living in solidarity with its God.

Jeremiah’s covenant tattoos and brands us as “God’s people.” It is an internal identity that will be evidenced by external behavior. What I just said? (repeat sentence) What is that? A sacrament. This last covenant is sacramental, my brothers and sisters. And in that sense, we will live God’s law not because we are obliged to as if we were prisoners, but because we want to, because our hearts are shaped in God’s grace and freedom. The capacity to be faithful and obedient recognizes this tattoo, and we remember God in grateful repose and deed. Our hearts will recognize, accept and live up to the gift. This covenant will overcome the conflict between knowing or wanting one thing and doing another.

Because God has written the capacity for love and faithfulness into us, the days are surely coming. In the meantime we hope and trust, and we expose our naked hearts to God. Thanks be to God, Amen.