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How many of you are planning to have family visit for Thanksgiving or you are traveling to visit someone? Since Staci and I have always lived a distance from my family, we often spent Thanksgiving with her family or had friends over to our home. This year, however, my children, parents, sister and her family, will all gather at our home. Needless to say, we're hoping everything goes well. Since our children are all grown, we no longer have to worry about kids saying something embarrassing, as was the case with one family who had guests over for Thanksgiving.

Jolene was only 8 years old and lived with her family in the country with her parents and brother. Consequently they did not often have visitors from the city. One day Jolene's mother said that father was bringing two guests home for Thanksgiving supper.

After they had enjoyed the turkey, Jolene went to the kitchen to help her mother, and proudly brought in the first piece of pumpkin pie and gave it to her father. Father then

passed the plate to a guest. When Jolene came in with the second piece and gave it to her father, he again gave it to a guest.

This was too much for Little Jolene, who blurted out, "It's no use, Daddy. The pieces are all the same size."<sup>1</sup>

Thanksgiving is a wonderful time of year when we pause to give thanks for God's blessings. That doesn't mean we expect God to give us everything we want, but that we take time to recognize what blessings we *do* have. Sometimes we get so overwhelmed with the complications of life that we forget to give thanks for those things we take for granted.

I imagine the prophet Jeremiah had a hard time giving thanks to God in the midst of the Babylonian exile, for he and his people had been forcibly carried away from their homes by the Babylonians to live in another land. This was a confusing and difficult time, which is reflected in the disorganized order of writings in the book of Jeremiah. Some commentators have suggested that the chaotic

structure of Jeremiah’s writings reflects the way he and the people felt—crushed and defeated.

In the midst of the chaos, Jeremiah tried to make sense of what had happened. On the one hand, he spoke and wrote words that challenged the leaders for their actions that may have led to their problems, and on the other, he offered comfort for citizens who were suffering.

In this morning’s scripture we heard how Jeremiah dictated God’s words to his secretary Baruch, who then wrote the words on a scroll, made from papyrus, a paper-like material. The words contained warnings about the disaster they faced, how they would need to change their ways, and how God would forgive them. Jeremiah then told Baruch to go and read the words from the scroll to the people gathered in the temple. When word reached the city officials about what Baruch was saying, they called him for a meeting.

“Where did you get this information?” they asked Baruch, possibly alarmed at the harshness that the words contained against them.

“Uh...well...Jeremiah spoke them. I just wrote them down.”

The officials replied, “You and Jeremiah better go and hide, for when your harsh words get to the king he won’t be happy about what you’ve said.”

And that’s what happened. The king heard about the words in the scroll while he was lounging by the fire in his palace. He asked to hear a reading of the scroll, and after each portion was read, the king cut the paper from the scroll and threw it into the fire.

The king did not want to hear the words in the scroll that suggested a change was needed. He was comfortable sitting by the fire in the winter while the people were struggling in the cold. Although Jeremiah spoke words of warning about the impending doom, the king burned the words, hoping that would make the danger go away.

Have you ever found it difficult to change, instead ignoring what needs to be done? Have you ever avoided something new? I’ve often found change the most difficult thing to try in...churches.

It seems a bit ironic to me, for we are a people of resurrection, who trust in the promise that no matter how bad things look, we know that new life can emerge from death. And yet, I've discovered that some church folks can be afraid of trying something new.

I remember reading years ago a book called *Dinosaur Heart Transplants*, which focused on the topic of renewing today's churches. The researcher focused mainly on large congregations, but most of his findings apply to any size of church.

1. He discovered that change and renewal happens as people in a congregation remember their past stories and remain open to writing new chapters in their church's story. Renewal doesn't come by throwing everything out and starting all over, but by respecting those who have traveled before you while at the same time allowing new people to use their creative ideas too.

2. Churches experience renewal as they engage in mission—working to help those beyond themselves. Some people can do this financially,

others through hands-on work, and others through prayer.

3. It takes planning and lots of work to renew a church, but more than that, it takes recognition of God's presence working in our midst. That's the key to renewal—trusting in God.

In my almost three months with you so far, I see signs of all three factors in this congregation. You do celebrate the past stories of this church, but you also remain open to new ideas. And of course, mission and reaching out are built into the very fabric of this congregation, as though it's written in your DNA. And thirdly, I sense a deep trust in God's presence in this place. Whether we have 50 gathered here or remember the crowds of 200, God is in our midst. During this season of Thanksgiving I give thanks for being here with you, for I know God has called us to be together, to reach out into our community to offer a sign of hope.

Offering hope may feel as difficult as transplanting a heart in a dinosaur, which I imagine Jeremiah felt in his day. God suggested to Jeremiah,

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however, that rather than a heart transplant, God would write God's teachings on their hearts. God said to Jeremiah, "The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people. It will be different from when I led them out of Egypt and created the stone tablets that they broke." It's as though God needed a new writing surface. The Ten Commandments of stone could be smashed and broken, and the words written on scrolls of paper could be burned, so God needed to write God's teachings somewhere else. Somewhere they would be less likely to be burned or broken.

God had an idea and told Jeremiah: "I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (*Tanakh*, Jeremiah 31:33).

Rather than a heart transplant, God offered a heart implant, God's teachings and promise of love

written directly deep within us. Written on our hearts is God's promise:

For I will forgive their iniquities,  
And remember their sins no more. (Jeremiah 31:34)

What wonderful words to hear in this season of Thanksgiving! Words that remind us how God's teachings are written within us, words that continue to guide us thousands of years later. Words reflected in the hope we celebrate during the upcoming Advent season as we wait for the birth of a small baby who came to live that promise on earth. No need to burn scrolls or go about transplanting the heart of a dinosaur, for God has written God's hope and love on our very hearts. Give thanks and celebrate!

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.guy-sports.com/humor/christmas/thanksgiving.htm>