

Covenant: Written on Our Hearts
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

The story is that the dress was first seen in a dream. A medicine man's granddaughter grew sick during the 1918 flu pandemic, and as he slept, his spirit guides came to him and told him to make a special dress for her. The dress should be made of bright colors, with small cones made from rolled snuff can lids hung from the dress with ribbon close to one another, so they make a melodic sound. The spirit guides said if his daughter danced in it, the dress would heal her.

So the first jingle dress was made, and the entire tribe came together to watch her dance. At first, she was too sick to dance alone and so her tribe carried her, but after a little time she was able to dance alone, cured of her illness.

The 1918 flu pandemic hit Native American communities hard, much like our current pandemic has done. The creation of the jingle dress was followed by a federal ban on ritual dancing on reservations in the 1920s. The dance wasn't banned forever, in recent years its resurgence has heralded a spiritual rebirth for many tribes.

Today, the dresses come in every color imaginable, from yellow to bright blue, to deep red, and accented with sparkles and decorated with fringes, embroidery, beading, and more. If you ever have an opportunity to see a dancer in person, go and witness this dance of healing and pride.

How many of you remember making a mix tape? In my teens I spent countless hours trying to tape record the songs playing on the radio. Unfortunately, the tape deck didn't work in my boombox, after my brother accidentally dropped it and one of the parts fell out.

So, I had to get creative. My mother had one of those clunky free-standing tape recorders so that she could tape lectures when she went back to college. It was about the size of one of our hymnals and it had really big buttons. You had to press down the record and play at the same time to get

it to work. Let me tell you, in the days before Spotify and i-tunes, these were some super high-class recordings!

I'd take whatever blank cassette tape I could find and load up the recorder. Then, I'd turn on the radio on my boombox. KC 101 was a favorite station that played all the top 40's music. I had to hold the recorder as close to the speakers as I could and hope the phone didn't ring, or the dog bark. Once I got everything set up, I'd lay down on the floor and wait.

I wanted to tape record my favorite songs because I wanted to memorize them. I wanted to be able to sing along with Duran Duran while riding in the car with my Aunt Tracy, who was just enough years older than me to be cool. I needed to hear Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" enough times so I could keep up with fast-paced, complicated lyrics referencing world politics that I didn't even come close to understanding yet.

My youth wasn't all pop songs though. Growing up in church I learned some hymns and prayers, too. The Lord's Prayer was probably the first I ever memorized. As an adult, during my chaplain residency at Norwalk Hospital, I came to truly appreciate the power of this prayer. You see, I spent much of my time with people whose memories were very poor, either because of condition like dementia or because they experienced trauma, like a motorcycle accident.

It was during these visits with people in various states of memory loss that I began being more intentional about praying the Lord's Prayer. I don't remember if another chaplain suggested I use it or if I just started saying it myself. Many of the patients I worked with had been raised in Christian churches. Presumably, nearly all of them had learned this prayer as they were children and had heard it repeatedly much of their lives.

Despite some minor variations, like how some people say "sins" and others say "trespasses" or "debts", nearly everyone knew the words, even if their memories were very poor. At the end of our visits, I would offer the Lord's prayer. It was amazing. People who could still speak clearly would usually say the words with me. On some occasions, a person might have trouble remembering all the words but could still pick up a few of them... Maybe the "Our Father" or the "on earth as it is in heaven."

I visited one lady who really couldn't say anything with much clarity, but she smiled and laughed a lot and hummed along with music. If I prayed the Lord's Prayer with her, she would mumble along with me, matching the

rhythm in which I was praying. Even as so many of her words were gone, this prayer was still inside of her... familiar and comforting.

I think people keep reading these prophecies of Jeremiah thousands of years after they were written, because we know something about having words written on our hearts. We know what it means to have ideas so deeply embedded in our behavior that they might as well be the blood that pumps through our veins, like a traditional jingle dance or a teenager's mixtape.

The music that taught us something about growing up, the ancient prayers that teach us about staying connected, the movements and dances that help us survive unspeakable trauma... all these are written on the hearts of the people, carried into a new world, a new life stage, a new relationship.

What are the things that are inscribed on your heart? What instructions from God have curled up around your bones and made you strong? What words and songs and rhythms are key to the memories that are the foundations of your life?

Jeremiah knew the people would need help rebuilding after the exile. Jeremiah knew that one word = covenant, was written on the hearts of the people. Their covenant with God was scrawled across the promise to all creation after the flood, the promise to Sarah and Abraham's descendants, and the promises to the lost and fearful wandering in the desert.

At the core of their common lives is the God who promises, who forgives, who holds people accountable, and, most of all, who is faithful. But in the midst of the desolation of exile, the notion of covenant can get lost.

In order to rebuild, Jeremiah knew that a new version of this covenant must arise. It will be in the pattern of the old: both parties will be committed. Both will tend to the powerless and the fearful. Both will be held accountable.

But, this covenant will also be new. The years of exile will change the people, and their promises to one another can't look quite the same.

But the words will be there. Deep within them. Renewing and moving them towards love of God and love of neighbor. What words has God written on your heart? What new creation is calling you today? Amen.