Advertisers love to use words like better, new, or improved to entice people into purchasing and using their products. The problem is that the promise that the new product will be better and an improvement over the old one does not always come true. That is not the case with the new covenant that God promised through the prophet Jeremiah to put into effect in the future - the covenant Jesus spoke of when he instituted Holy Communion.

On this Maundy Thursday, our reading shows us that Jesus is our Great High Priest by contrasting the new covenant he established with the old covenant, which established the Old Testament priesthood. It’s appropriate tonight as we hear those familiar words our Lord spoke when he instituted Holy Communion: Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

When Jesus spoke of a new covenant, he was indicating that there was another covenant that would supersede the old covenant. And tonight, as we look at that old covenant, we will see more clearly what the new covenant is and we will appreciate all the more what our Savior did when by his suffering and death - when by shedding his blood, he established the new covenant. Jesus our Great High Priest is the mediator of a new covenant, a covenant that is better, stronger, and smarter than the old covenant.

The writer of Hebrews shows us how the new covenant is an improvement over the old covenant. He writes: The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. When our author mentions the old covenant, he is taking us back to Mt Sinai, where God made a covenant - or solemn agreement - with the nation of Israel.

After God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, he gathered them at the foot of Mt Sinai. There he told them that if they obeyed him, they would always be his special people and would always live in the Promised Land of Canaan. Through Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, God told the Israelites the terms of his agreement with them – laws that would regulate every aspect of their social and religious lives.

The Israelites heard the terms and agreed, saying: We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey. So the agreement was made. God laid down the terms, the people agreed. A relationship was established, and then the covenant was put into effect using the blood of bulls. Some of that blood was splashed on the altar of the Lord and the rest was sprinkled on the people. As he sprinkled the blood on the people, Moses said: This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. The agreement was sealed, put into effect with blood.

But within days, the Israelites had broken that covenant by worshiping a golden calf. The author of Hebrews quotes from Jeremiah 31 where the Lord says: They did not remain faithful to my covenant. Yet God did not simply wipe out his covenant with Israel. Through Jeremiah, God promised that he would make a new covenant. This new covenant would be different from the old covenant God made with Israel at Mt Sinai. Again the writer quotes Jeremiah 31: It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt. The new covenant would be different. It would be superior to the old because this new covenant would be based on better promises.

You see, the old covenant contained promises - promises that Israel would always live in Canaan and always be God’s special people - but those promises were conditional. Those promises required obedience from the Israelites. God said: If you obey me you will be my people and live in Canaan forever. But the Israelites could not do it. They were sinful people; they broke God’s covenant by their sins.

So God promised a new covenant - new in the sense that it was different. It would have
better promises - unconditional promises. What are those unconditional promises? God says through Jeremiah: **I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.** That is what makes the new covenant better than the old one. It is based on better promises: sins are forgiven and forgotten for Christ’s sake without condition.

But wasn’t there forgiveness of sins in the Old Testament? Yes, through faith in the promises first given to Adam and Eve and then repeated to Abraham. As we look at the covenant that God made with Israel at Mt Sinai, we must never lose sight of the promise of a Savior given in the Garden of Eden - the offspring of the woman who would crush the serpent’s head, and repeated to Abraham - that all nations of the earth would be blessed through one of his descendants. We need to remember that the covenant God made with the nation of Israel at Mt Sinai doesn’t replace that earlier covenant, but it was added as a temporary measure in support of the promises of the Savior given previously. It had an important role to play in keeping Israel together as a nation until the Savior was born and it reminded the people how much they needed that Savior. The old covenant also contained instructions for the priesthood and sacrifices that foreshadowed Christ, but the Old Testament believers had only shadows of the Savior, promises that payment would be made for sin, and prophecies of Christ’s saving work.

We New Testament Christians have the reality. Tonight, we see how God put his new covenant into effect. As Jesus took the cup of wine and gave it to his disciples, he said: **This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.** Jesus became the mediator of the better covenant - the new covenant of forgiveness of sins, by offering himself on the cross for the sins of the world. By his blood, he has removed the sins that separated us from God. Because he died bearing the sins of the whole world, God can unconditionally promise the whole world of sinners: **Your sins are forgiven. My son has paid your debt and removed your guilt.** God brought us into that covenant and he remains faithful to us.

But we are not always faithful to him. Like Israel of old, we find ourselves worshiping other gods; we forget his goodness and grumble against him. In mercy, God shows us our sins, brings us to repentance and faith, and restores our blessed covenant relationship. And each time we partake of the Lord’s Supper, receiving Christ’s body and blood under the bread and wine, he reassures us that we are still his dearly loved children. Jesus says: **Do this in remembrance of me.** That reminds of his great promise: **I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.**

Yes, Christ is the mediator of a new and better covenant, one that promises our sins are forgiven and forgotten through the blood of Christ. Our reading also leads us to see that Christ is the mediator of the new covenant, which is stronger than the old.

Regarding the new covenant, God said through Jeremiah: **I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.** The contrast here is between the laws God wrote on tablets of stone and the way he would inscribe his will on the hearts of his people in the New Testament. Not everyone in Israel believed God’s promise to send a Savior. Many of them grumbled about being led by God in the desert and some wanted to go back to Egypt. They were stiff-necked and stubborn. When God wrote his commands on stone tablets, those commands came as a heavy burden placed on the people from the outside. The only reason they obeyed - if they did - was out of fear of God’s wrath and punishment. They considered God’s holy will for them to be a heavy burden.

However, even in the Old Testament there were also those who believed in God. They knew God’s promise of a Savior and gladly did his will. They had God’s law written in their hearts. They were inspired by God’s love to obey him. The author of Psalm 119 was such an Old Testament believer. He wrote: **I run in the path of your commands, for you have set**
my heart free. And Jeremiah says that when God establishes his new covenant, all who are brought into the new covenant relationship with God by faith will be like that. They will obey God from the heart. They will do God’s will gladly. Inspired by God’s love, they will in turn love God and their fellow man.

Jesus had this in mind when he said to his disciples: A new command I give you: love one another. That command is not new in itself. God had commanded that in the Old Testament. What would be new was the motive for loving others. When we see how Jesus, in great love, went to the cross to bear our sins in his body and cleanse us from them by his blood, he opens our eyes to see how in his grace he freely, fully, and finally forgives us our sins.

In the Lord’s Supper, he gives us his body and blood as a precious receipt that payment for sin has been made. and now with hearts warmed by his love, we strive to live lives of love for God and others. As St Paul wrote: Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. That is the power of the new covenant - the power of God’s forgiving love in Christ! That is what makes the new covenant stronger than the old one.

Christ is also the mediator of the new covenant, which is smarter than the old. Jeremiah says that when God puts this new covenant into effect, people will know God better and have a clearer picture of what he is like. Jeremiah wrote: No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, Know the Lord, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

It is important to note that Jeremiah says that no one will have to say: Know the Lord. The Lord is God’s covenant name - a name that emphasizes his grace and forgiving love. Now of course, the Old Testament believers knew that name of God; they knew their God as the Lord for they had experienced it. The promise of a Savior, his selection of Israel as his own special people - all of this was evidence of God’s love for Israel. But the full glory of God’s love - the full revelation of the name, The Lord - Israel in the Old Testament did not get.

That revelation would only come with God’s sacrifice of his Son on the cross. God’s offering of his Son unto death on the cross in the place of a world of sinners fully reveals the glory of God. Jesus understood that God’s glory would be revealed most clearly in his crucifixion. That is why he said: Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. It is God’s greatest glory to be the Savior of sinners, to reveal his amazing grace as he offers his Son as the substitute for sinners. Jesus once said to his disciples: Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

How blessed we are with the full revelation of God’s forgiving love. Now let’s strive to grow in this knowledge of Christ. Let’s devote ourselves to making known to others the knowledge of our glorious Lord through personal witness, prayers and gifts. We also do it each time we partake of the Lord’s Supper, as Paul said: Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Tonight we hear Jesus say: This is my blood of the new covenant. Now you know that means that Jesus, our Great High Priest, is the mediator of a covenant that is superior, stronger, and smarter than the old covenant. Amen.

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