**Jeremiah 20:7-13** July 5, 2020

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*Jeremiah 20:7O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. 8Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. 9But if I say, “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. 10I hear many whispering, “Terror on every side! Report him! Let’s report him!” All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, “Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him.”*

*11But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten. 12O Lord Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. 13Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**A Tottering Fence and a Mighty Warrior**

Just the other day, I discovered a new place in our house. Well, not exactly a new place. You know how sometimes, when you stand in just the right place, face just the right direction and speak just loud enough, you get this echoey sound, even though the room is carpeted and furnished? I accidentally found one of those. I don’t know about you, but when I find one of those, I stand there talking into the corner, “Hey!” “How’d that happen!” “Four score and seven years ago…” and my wife walks in wondering if I have lost my mind. In the end, it is a curiosity and nothing more. I think it is called resonance.

Bible passages sometimes are like that. There are some Bible passages that people—many, maybe most Christians in a certain time and place find meaningful. Those passages resonate. You find those passages on Christian themed coffee mugs, wall hangings and t-shirts. They pop up in social media posts again and again. One passage that finds resonance in our day is that passage from Philippians, *“I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength”* (4:13). Another is this word of assurance, *“‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’”* (Jer. 29:11).

For one reason or another certain passages echo something that people living in our time are looking for, but not finding anywhere else. Let’s focus for a moment on another passage that seems to resonate in our time.

Some of you remember when Faith Lutheran moved out of that storefront over on Wilson. Do you remember the name of the church that moved in after us? The Potter’s House. Well, that church is named after something that happened in Jeremiah’s life one day before our reading. In Jeremiah chapter 18 God told the prophet Jeremiah to go down to a potter’s house. So, like a good prophet, Jeremiah did. When Jeremiah got there, the potter was making something, but the potter didn’t like the way it was turning out. So, he pulled the clay all back together into a lump and started again. Then God spoke, *“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?”* (18:1ff). It was a reminder to trust and accept God’s purposes for our lives. If we refuse the Potter’s direction, he will find another use for us. That’s what happened at the Potter’s House. Jeremiah spoke a prophetic word that still resonates today.

Now you would expect that a prophet who is regularly getting special delivery messages straight from God, you would expect him to be fulfilled and excited about his job. Instead, the day after the potter’s house incident, Jeremiah was shaking his finger at God, speaking the bitter words of our reading: ***“O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed.”*** What is going on? How can a prophet of God, who communicates with God on a level that none of us can claim, how can he get so discouraged that he is yelling at God, “You lied to me!”

To find the answer, let’s retrace Jeremiah’s steps from the potter’s house back to his own. Here we are going to condense chapters 18, 19 and part of 20 into a paragraph.

So, Jeremiah was in the potter’s house on the edge of Jerusalem, his eyes glazing over as he watched the potter’s wheel—round and round it goes, where it stops nobody knows—and suddenly God adds, *“My people have forgotten me.”* (18:15) He continues, *“[Jeremiah,] go and buy a clay pot from the potter. Take along some of the elders and priests and go”* outside the city *“and say, ‘Hear the word of the Lord, O Kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem… I am going to bring a disaster on this place...’* (19:1-8) *Then break the jar while those who go with you are watching, and say to them, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city.’”* (10-11). Great Independence Day message, right?

Surprise, surprise, Jeremiah didn’t get to go home to supper that night. Instead an official ordered Jeremiah detained, beaten up and then his bruised body locked in the stocks overnight. (Have you ever been at one of those historical sites where they have stocks and you put your hands and feet and neck in it and in about 15 seconds your back is starting to hurt? I can’t imagine 12 hours. Then, people insult you and throw rotten tomatoes at you!) The next morning Jeremiah was released and sent home. Hurting and humiliated, in the privacy of his home, the prophet spoke to God, ***“O Lord, you deceived me… I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.”*** I thought I was your prophet God? What’s up? I want nothing to do with this. ***“But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”*** Jeremiah wants to hang it up, but the spirit God has put in his heart won’t let him. He wants out, but his conscience stops him. He is frustrated, despairing, hoping that God doesn’t talk to him again so that he doesn’t have to go out and face the hateful mob again. He dreads his job.

I love the Bible. I really, really love the Bible, because it portrays life the way it really is. In this book we don’t get saints so shining holy we can’t even look at them. We get saints just like us. People who have a tough time in life, and it bothers them! People who try to do what is right, and it’s unappreciated or even thrown back in their face, and they hurt. They ache down to their core. These are God’s people. These are who we are. And sometimes our prayers *do* start like Jeremiah’s prayer. ***“O Lord, you deceived me… But if I say, ‘ I will net mention him’… his word is in my heart like a fire!”*** Now let me be clear, I am not saying that Jeremiah’s attitude was good. It is wrong; a sin. He didn’t want to be a vessel in the Potter’s hand. But isn’t it sometimes our starting point for a return to God? We start far away and realize that it’s not that God left us, but that we left God. Then we retrace our steps back to him through confessing our sins.

Jeremiah is a reminder that even the strongest in faith among us, will break when left to ourselves. Shame and pain are tremendously strong tools of Satan. Like Jeremiah, sooner or later we will crumple. For our strength in fighting temptation we need to look elsewhere.

As soon as Jeremiah starts looking elsewhere, his tone turns triumphant. He stops his complaints and he starts to sing. He takes his eyes off himself and turns them toward God.

Rejection did not mean what Jeremiah thought it meant. It did not mean God had abandoned him, and it did not mean that he had failed. With the eyes of faith, he turned toward God and said in verse 11, ***“But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.”*** He remembers that God is with him. God has given him the opportunity to speak and he has spoken, and in fact, there were a few—a very few to be honest, but a few—who did hear and humble themselves. But it didn’t matter if they listened. It mattered that Jeremiah had spoken.

Jeremiah’s mission was the same one Jesus gave his disciples in the Gospel reading: to acknowledge Christ before people. And if things ever got rough, they were to remember, *“It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!”* Which is to say, if people wouldn’t listen to Jesus Christ, don’t be surprised if some don’t listen to you. And then Christ assures them, *“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven”* (Mt 10:24-33). Okay. Thank you, Jesus. Please, help me do this.

But why? What is the reason that God allowed all these terrible things to happen to Jeremiah? There was more than a single beating and night in the stocks for Jeremiah. Read the rest of the book of Jeremiah and you will read sorrow after sorrow. Few listened. At least six different times Jeremiah launches into complaints against God like today’s reading. Time and again God confronts him, tells him to repent, and then restores him. So it kept going through 40 years of preaching. And in the end, Jeremiah, though a faithful messenger of God’s word, he suffered under God’s judgment on Israel. He was taken into exile and rejected by his people.

Why? Why would God do that to Jeremiah? Why does God make you a messenger to people who won’t listen to you. You pray for them day after day. You pray that your loved one will humbly turn and throw themselves at their Savior’s feet—but they don’t. Why does it happen that you start to bring spiritual considerations to the table, and people mock you, “Ohhh. Let’s here it from Mr. Religious”? And when you try to keep quiet about these things – why is it that you just can’t leave well enough alone? Or if you do be quiet, why is it that your conscience plagues you and makes you feel guilty for *not* opening you mouth? Why do you have this irresistible urge to sacrifice yourself for people who really don’t want God?

Let’s think of it this way:

Why is it that we give thanks for our mothers on Mother’s Day and our fathers on Father’s Day? Why are some awarded the medals of honor, silver stars and the like? The answers are all the same. Those willing to sacrifice everything for others, we know that they care.

How do you know that God loves you? First John 4 answers: *“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”* The way we know that God loves us is that God gave up something for us. God the Father gave his Son over to death. God the Son gave up his life for us. He paid the debt that we owed for our sins, out of his own pocket, his own lifeblood. We know that, believe it, and praise Jesus for it.

Now that the Son of God has completed his sacrifice and ascended into heaven, how is it that the people of this world are to know the love of God who is unseen? Might it not be through God’s people? God’s love is seen not people living the “blessed life” with all the bling and success that some people seem to think Christians should enjoy, but through a life of sacrifice. People find out about their Savior when Christians are willing to risk their reputation just so others know their Savior. As Christ once gave his life to save us, Christ’s people lay it on the line so people know Him. Patiently enduring the scorn of the world, carrying the rough splintery cross, communicates a deep concern for people, even if they don’t want to hear the message.

Maybe the reason that Jeremiah was called to be a *suffering* prophet is the same reason that God has put before you difficult and uncomfortable opportunities to share God’s love: So that through your sacrifice, “God’s love” becomes more than a warm and cuddly phrase, and is seen for being the strong and sure commitment of Christ Jesus for every person.

Somewhere in one of the psalms, a believer describes himself as a *“leaning wall, a tottering fence”* (62:3). I imagine that is what Jeremiah felt like. One more gust of wind, and he would fall over. Yet in that psalm, like in Jeremiah, when we stop concentrating on our troubles and weakness, and instead remember God’s deeds and promises, we will say with Jeremiah, ***“But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior”*** and we will speak. Amen.