

17th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B
September 27, 2009
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Jeremiah 38:1-13
Pastor Paul Horn

“Stuck in the mud?”

Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jehucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malkijah heard what Jeremiah was telling all the people when he said, ² “This is what the LORD says: ‘Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his life; he will live.’ ³ And this is what the LORD says: ‘This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.’”

⁴ Then the officials said to the king, “This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin.”

⁵ “He is in your hands,” King Zedekiah answered. “The king can do nothing to oppose you.”

⁶ So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king’s son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.

⁷ But Ebed-Melech, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, ⁸ Ebed-Melech went out of the palace and said to him, ⁹ “My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city.”

¹⁰ Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Cushite, “Take thirty men from here with you and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies.”

¹¹ So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern. ¹² Ebed-Melech the Cushite said to Jeremiah, “Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes.” Jeremiah did so, ¹³ and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.

Former Vietnamese Army officer Than Van Truong converted to Christianity and joined a Vietnamese Christian house-church organization. As his ministry grew, he started to send Bibles to high-ranking government authorities in Vietnam, leaving encouraging messages for them to refer to God’s Word for truth and wisdom. He was arrested and spent 239 days in prison, even though official charges were never brought against him. Once Truong was released, Vietnamese officials made sure he was under close surveillance. He was arrested a second time, just over a year later. Even though prosecutors could not bring him up on criminal charges again, he was incarcerated in a prison. Four months later, Truong was told that he was being detained for illegally proclaiming the gospel.

One year later, Truong was transferred to a mental hospital, where hospital officials entrenched in a Marxist worldview diagnosed him as insane for believing in God. He was locked in a

solitary room and injected with strong tranquilizers. The undisclosed drugs made him sluggish and very ill, but his health returned when the staff began giving him oral medication instead, which he refrained from swallowing.

After a few weeks, he was moved to different rooms. Seeing his chance to continue evangelizing, Truong baptized a number of his fellow patients, many of whom were mentally sound, but pleaded insanity in order to avoid the harsh conditions of prison. An international letter-writing campaign ensued. Publicity and international public pressure were enough to convince the Vietnamese government to release Truong, one year after he had been taken to the mental hospital. (*Voices of the Martyrs*, 2007, pgs.447-448)

This story sounds a lot like our lesson about Jeremiah this morning. This story about Mr. Truong happened only four years ago in 2005. Some things never change...

Jeremiah had been detained the courtyard of the prison inside of the walls of Jerusalem. He was arrested for proclaiming this message, "Flee the city! It will be destroyed! Leave and you will live!" The Babylonian army had surrounded Jerusalem and had begun building siege works to break down the walls. But King Zedekiah would not surrender. He believed more in his sinful flesh and the power of his army than he did in God's divine will. It was God's will that the city be destroyed. The people of Israel had been, for years now, persistent in their unbelief and failure to listen to God's commandments. Now the Father had to discipline his children. Even though he was under suspicion as favoring the enemy's cause and even of playing traitor to his own nation, Jeremiah was not deterred from his course of action as the LORD's spokesman.

Four officials, Shephatiah, Gedaliah, Jehucal and Pashhur, heard what Jeremiah was telling the people and did not like it. Soldiers and visitors to the court of the prison were listening to Jeremiah and defecting to the Babylonian army. This was not good for the morale of the troops to hear that they will most certainly lose. They hated Jeremiah so much that they wanted to put him to death. They petitioned the king, "What Jeremiah is saying is not good for the people! He must be done away with!" The king replied, "The king can do nothing to oppose you! Do with him as you will." (vs5) It's not that King Zedekiah didn't have the authority, he lacked character and back-bone. He was afraid of his own officials! So as not to put his blood on their own hands, the four officials seized Jeremiah and lowered him into a cistern in the courtyard of the prison. A cistern was a bell-shaped hole under the ground with a narrow opening at the top from which one could draw water. This cistern was empty, but, as we learn, Jeremiah did sink down into the mud. They would let him die a slow and painful death of starvation. Sounds a lot like what Joseph's brothers did to him.

Our story continues with a new character, Ebed-Melech, a Cushite, (from Ethiopia), who was a royal official in the king's household. He was not even a Jew by birth, but as we'll see in his actions and words, he was a true Jew, a true believer. He went boldly to the king, not in secret, but out in open, while the king was sitting at a gate of the city, where kings went to settle legal disputes. Ebed-Melech risked persecution himself. But he petitioned the king for Jeremiah's life. Zedekiah again waffles in his indecision, reversing his previous judgment, showing his weakness of character. Ebed-Melech brought a large force of 30 men, in case the officials tried to intervene with the rescue. They lifted Jeremiah out of the cistern. He remained there in the

courtyard of the prison under house arrest for 18 months, until the siege ended and the Babylonians finally broke through the city walls.

Why was Jeremiah treated this way? He was a man of God, a prophet, someone to whom the LORD spoke directly. It was because the people did not want to hear his words. They did not want to hear that they were wrong and that God was disciplining them and that they needed to repent. Their unbelief, their foolish pride made Jeremiah's words seem like foolishness. This was a tough ministry for Jeremiah. The majority of the people to whom he preached would not heed God's warnings to repent. He was constantly surrounded by opposition. Yet he stood up and boldly proclaimed God's Word.

Here in church, amongst friends, I have a receptive crowd. You are all here because you want to be here. You understand the necessity of repentance. You see the need to be lifted up and strengthened by the message of forgiveness in God's Word and Sacraments. But outside those doors, it's not always the case. Those of you who have gone canvassing with me or have made phone calls to prospects or who have hung flyers on doors know, because you've had the door slammed in your face, or an angry person on the phone hanging up with you. We even had a lady threaten to sue the church for harassment. We've had nasty emails telling us not to invite them to church anymore, to stop sending the newsletter.

Those of you who have had conversations in your office, the factory, or out in the field with fellow soldiers know that outside of these doors, folks are not always receptive to the message of Jesus. In conversations in your front yard with the neighbor, in your own home, in the school cafeteria with classmates or at a sleepover with friends, not everyone wants to hear about Jesus.

In the Gospel today from Mark 8:27-35, Jesus told disciples, "If you are my disciples, you will take up your cross and follow me." In other words, if you hold to my teachings, you will be faithful even to the point of suffering and even death. Expect it, because you're wearing the colors of the team. You will expect opposite, like if you wore a Florida Gator jersey to the Wildcats game last night in Lexington, or if you traveled north and walked into the Horseshow stadium of Ohio State University and wore the blue and yellow of Michigan, you would expect opposition.

In our Second Lesson this morning from 1 Peter 4, the apostle talks about suffering for sake of Christ; he tells us not to be surprised by it. But, he says, "Commit yourselves to your faithful Creator and continue to do good." Put your body and soul in the care of him who fashioned and formed you in mother's womb, who has placed his protective hand over you until now and will continue to do so, and then, continue to do what he commands you to do as Christians; stand up for him. Preach his Word. Share the message of Jesus. At the end of the service this morning we will sing, "Stand up, Stand up for Jesus!" Yes!

That's easy to do here... amongst friends... among members of the same team... but what about out there...outside of those doors? Will you walk out and tell your coworkers and friends, "Come and listen to what God has done for me?" Or will you sit down on your bottoms and do nothing? Instead of standing up will you sit down and do nothing, afraid of what they might say to you, or they might ask a question you cannot answer immediately, or they might attack you and challenge your beliefs? Or will you do nothing because you make the excuse, "I don't have

the skills to do that... I don't know the Bible that well." When you reach out to our inactive members, will you feel bad telling them that they're sinning by despising God's Word and Sacraments, or will you sympathize with them whatever excuse they give? Do our actions testify to others that we boldly confess like Peter, "You are the Christ?" Are you stuck in the mud? not because someone put you there, but because you've planted yourself there by your own inactivity?

I don't know about you, but when I fail to stand up for truth, when I let an opportunity to share Jesus pass by, when I am afraid of witnessing... I don't know about you, but I feel like Jeremiah, sinking down into the mud, stuck in my sins, stuck in the darkness of my own guilt, looking up out of that hole in the ground and cry out, "Lord, please help me!" The Psalm writer in 40:2 said, "You pulled me up out of the mud and mire and set me on rocky ground." Doesn't Jesus do just that when we go to him in repentance for our sins? He does. He lifts us up again by showing us how he has forgiven us.

When Jesus was in Capernaum he told the people, "I'm not going to do any more miracles here because of your lack of faith." That was truth. But the people hated him so much for saying it, they drove him out of the city and were ready to throw him off a cliff. To the Pharisees Jesus said, "You're all like whitewashed tombs. You look real pretty on the outside, but inside you're full of corruption and death." It was truth, but they wanted to kill him for saying it. When the Pharisees asked Jesus, "Are you the Son of God?" Jesus answered, "Yes I am," even though it secured his death sentence. When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you a king?" He boldly answered, "Yes, I am a king." Jesus stood up and said, "I will save you from your sins." He did not back down. He defended the truths of Scripture. And by his perfect witness, you and I have been made perfect!

Not only did his life save us, but his death as well. Of all the prophets, apostles, Christian men and women whose blood has been spilt, none of that can help us in our salvation, but only the blood of Christ, the Lamb, can and has saved us from our sins. Which is why we sing, "I lay my sins on Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God, I bring my guilt to Jesus, to wash my crimson stains white in his blood most precious, till not a spot remains." (*Christian Worship* 372:1)

For your sins of fear in witnessing, for failure to stand up, for our excuses, Jesus says, "Baptism now saves you, a promise from God that you have a clear conscience before Him." (1Pet 3:21) Through the sprinkling of water and Christ's command his perfect life covers over our sins. The blood of Jesus washes sins away, given through baptismal waters. And today, we return to those waters through repentance, Jesus lifts us up out of the mud and mire of our sins and renews us, strengthens us, and reminds us that our guilt is cleansed, and that we stand guiltless before the Father.

Empowered by the message of forgiveness and our baptisms, we will stand up, like Jeremiah, and no longer be fearful, but confident. And if we admit that we are not good at telling the story of Jesus, then we will do what is necessary to equip ourselves to carry out Christ's command, "Go and make disciples of all nations, by baptizing and teaching." (Matthew 28:19,20) If my sole purpose on this earth is to come to faith in Christ, and then share that hope with others, (and it is according to Scripture), then I will do what I can to be the best at that. We at Faith Lutheran

Church give you the opportunities to do just that. In our Sunday morning adult Bible class we are studying parables and stories from the gospels, stories you know very well, and exploring how we can use those stories to share Jesus with others. You say that you are not a Lutheran theologian or dogmatician and cannot explain the doctrines of the Bible? We offer our Bible Information Class still running on Wednesday evenings. This week we will talk about Baptism and next week about Holy Communion. Come to those next two lessons and learn more! Our lay-led Adult Discipleship class will begin again on Wednesday evenings in October. We have a women's Bible study on Wednesday mornings. It has been a joy to watch those women grow in their faith. We provide opportunities for our little ones and teens to grow through catechism class and Sunday school.

As men and women, children, teenagers and young adults, we will equip ourselves and empowered by God's Word, we will no longer be afraid to confess Jesus as Savior, even if it means ridicule, mockery, persecution, even to the point of death, for Christ promises me, "Be faithful, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10) To that end, keep us faithful, dear Lord! Amen!