

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 18 -- September 27th and 30th, 2012

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Because the LORD revealed their plot to me, I knew it, for at that time he showed me what they were doing. I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me, saying, "Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more."

But, O LORD Almighty, you who judge righteously and test the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our Gospel lesson for last Sunday was somewhat similar to our Gospel lesson for today. In both of them Jesus talks about the meaning of discipleship. Today He reminds his disciples of what he would go through for them and talks of discipleship in terms of the same kind of selfless service to others. Last week he said discipleship involved denying oneself, taking up the cross and following him – even when things get tough.

Today we will be considering the life of Christian discipleship in the context of our Old Testament lesson. The man we will be considering this morning is the prophet Jeremiah. If we could summarize the incident recalled for us in our text and the very practical lessons drawn from it, we might entitle it:

Sermon Theme: Jeremiah And His Faithful Life!

- 1. His faithfulness brought him difficult consequences**
- 2. God's faithfulness brought him peace and comfort**

First some background information on Jeremiah, his story, and what it was that got him to the place we find him in our text. Jeremiah lived to be a man of probably 70 or so and lived around 600 BC. He carried out his work as a prophet of God for over 40 years. He lived and worked in the land of Judah, which was the southern part of Israel and the area where Jerusalem was located.

He began his work while a God-fearing king named Josiah was on the throne. Unfortunately, after Josiah died, spiritually speaking, things went downhill fast. Most of the people of Judah abandoned the One True God by either openly practicing idolatry or by simply going through the motions of worship while in reality they cared little for God and His Word. About 150 years earlier God, through the prophet Isaiah, said of the people of that day: **"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."** Jeremiah found himself in the same situation.

It was under such poor spiritual conditions that Jeremiah was asked by God to issue repeated, strong calls for repentance. Because the people were turning a deaf ear to God, Jeremiah boldly proclaimed God's coming judgment upon them. In that sense he was often a prophet of doom and gloom – just like many of the other Old Testament prophets. However, of all the prophets, Jeremiah is one of the best known. The book that bears his name provides us with information and insights into his life. For example, he's been called "the Weeping Prophet" because his judgments brought him no personal satisfaction. He loved his people and wept over the sentence they were bringing upon themselves. Someone who captured his spirit quite well was the artist Michelangelo. One of the figures he painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is a powerful looking man with his head buried in his hands, obviously in grief. That is Jeremiah – God's prophet.

So the picture that emerges of Jeremiah is a man of God who faithfully lived his life for the Lord. In the words of Jesus, Jeremiah was one who **"denied himself, took up his cross and followed"** the Word of God. The opening verses of our text tell us where this faithfulness got him: **"Because the Lord revealed their plot to me, I knew it, for at that time he showed me what they were doing. I had been like a**

gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me, saying ‘Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.’ The “they” he talks about were men – personal enemies – from Jeremiah’s hometown of Anathoth. They didn’t like Jeremiah and wanted him dead. Why? Because Jeremiah spoke the truth and the truth struck a nerve. The people had been unfaithful to God, and Jeremiah had unapologetically called them to repentance.

The problem was not that the people didn’t understand what Jeremiah was telling them or even that they didn’t know he was telling them the truth; it was that they didn’t want to change. They liked things the way they were. They thought they had reached a pretty good arrangement. They would live as if God didn’t matter or had no bearing on their lives, but then they would convince themselves they really were “religious people” by doing the 6th century BC equivalent of showing up in church once in a while or throwing a few dollars God’s way to buy Him off, fully expecting His backing and blessing.

Jeremiah called them on their surface spirituality. And they understood his message. They just didn’t like it. So they went after the messenger. They tried to kill him, and would have succeeded had not the Lord in some way intervened and made Jeremiah aware of the plot at hand. So we see that the consequence of faithfulness on Jeremiah’s part was to attract the anger of faithless people toward him.

In the next verse we see how he handled this troubling situation. It’s actually a short prayer. **“But O Lord Almighty, you who judge righteously and test the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.”** At first it may appear that Jeremiah is looking only for revenge, and that he hardly uttered this prayer in the spirit of Jesus, who teaches us in the Gospel of Luke (6:28) to **“bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you.”** And maybe this was the case. Maybe he was “venting” to God.

But maybe a better explanation is that Jeremiah was not focusing on what had been done to him personally, but rather what had been done to God – the One who had commissioned Jeremiah to act and speak as he did. Eliminating Jeremiah was just another example of the people’s hatred toward the One True God who had sent him. So Jeremiah prayed that God’s justice would prevail in this matter.

It is also significant to note the last phrase of this prayer, because this is the key to how Jeremiah handled this and every other troubling situation he found himself in. He says, **“For to you I have committed my cause.”** In other words, *“Lord, I am your disciple; I trust completely in your wisdom and guidance for my life.”* This is a beautiful statement of confidence that the Lord would see him through this and any other predicament he might come up against. It also indicates that Jeremiah didn’t merely believe in God; he believed *God* and His many promises that He will never leave or forsake His children. And in doing so he is an example to us all.

So far we have the examination of our text. Let’s spend the next few minutes identifying the very contemporary lessons to be learned from this incident in the life of an ancient believer. We’ll limit ourselves to a couple of things Jeremiah experienced as a faithful Child of God – and which we can also expect to encounter in our lives as Disciples of Christ.

Lesson #1: ***Expect to be challenged.*** Jeremiah stood for God, but that was not what the rest of the world stood for. The result: his faith was challenged. Today we can expect the same thing.

Ask the Christian young man or woman who attends a secular university. They will tell you how their faith is challenged both inside and outside the classroom. Inside the classroom the Bible is openly challenged as the source of truth. Christianity is viewed as one alternative among many, and not a particularly useful one because it is often associated with a narrow-minded and unenlightened view of life.

Outside the classroom (and reinforced by so much of what is seen on TV and in the movies) is the open acceptance and even promotion of a moral – or perhaps better, *immoral*; or perhaps even better, *amoral* – approach to life that we as faithful Christians cannot condone.

The same thing extends beyond the university. I don’t have to tell you that. The challenge to faith can be found at the work place, at social gatherings, sometimes even within our immediate or extended families. Sometimes the challenge to faith goes a step farther and we find ourselves drawing the anger of those who do not like or do not wish to be reminded of what we stand for.

Example: Ever get into a conversation – maybe with those who readily admit they are not Christians, but also maybe with those who readily admit they are – and express a Biblical position on some hot button social topic like living together before marriage, or same-sex issues, or beginning or end of life issues, or the fact that all religions maybe really aren't all different paths to the same place, or something else where God's Word may not be politically correct but is nonetheless abundantly clear?

If you have, you know that sometimes your Biblically shaped opinion is dismissed as being way out of the mainstream. You also know that personally you are probably being sized up as rigid and unloving and intolerant. Sometimes standing up for God's truth brings with it a certain sense of loneliness and weariness. Sometimes we feel like we're swimming against the tide – because we are. Jeremiah felt all those things. So will we.

However, that's not the end of the story. The second great lesson of our text is while we can expect to be challenged, we can also expect God to help us deal with any and every situation. Remember the last phrase of Jeremiah's prayer? He committed his cause to God. And in that confidence – which had been proven to him time and time again – he found peace and strength. Herein is the lesson for us. As we commit our cause to God, trusting Him above our worries, we too find that peace and strength. Ours in the confidence of knowing Romans 8:32: **“He who did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** And the verses which follow that tell us that nothing can ever or will ever separate us from the love of Christ.

The point: God has met our greatest need, the forgiveness of our sins that separate us from God. He did this through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as our substitute and Savior. We now have the confidence of eternal life. And if God has met the greatest eternal need in our life, he will meet every other temporal and lesser need as well -- including the need for strength when faith is challenged. That is our confidence.

Ours is the confidence of knowing that **“though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging”** we never have to fear, because **“God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble”** (Psalm 46:1-3). Ours is the confidence of knowing that even if others dismiss us because our discipleship with Christ and our allegiance to God's Word, God will never leave us or forsake us. And **“if God is for us, who can be against us?”** Or to put it another way: if God is for us, who cares who is against us?

The bottom line is this: In our lives of faith and our journey on this earth we can expect many things, including direct challenges to our faith. But the great expectation we can count on is the promise that God is at our side at all times and in all circumstances. Jeremiah clung tightly to this promise and found peace. So will we. And on that note we will bring our thoughts to a close. Today we have considered a great figure from the Old Testament whom we don't often get to spend time with. May the words and example of Jeremiah as a disciple of Christ and child of God inspire us, challenge us, and give us confidence to live – as he did – the faithful life. Amen.