

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 16, 2018

Jeremiah 38:1-13

1 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.

Jesus said in our gospel lesson, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34). This one verse gives the essential definition of what to it means to follow Christ. Being a Christian will mean carrying a cross, it is the necessary consequence of believing. Such a cross is not the cause of our being saved—that is Christ’s cross. The definition for our cross is any suffering that we face as a consequence of our faith in Christ. This includes not only outward persecution and ridicule, but more often our own internal struggle with temptations to sin, ranging from sins of moral indifference or laziness to sins of self-righteousness or despair. To explore this essential part of being a Christian this morning/evening we will use the story of Jeremiah and the cistern in our sermon text and do a **Character Study in Cross Bearing**. We will look at all the people here who played a role in these verses and then compare them to our own lives as we follow Christ and take up our crosses.

We begin with the men listed in verse 1: Shephatiah, Gedaliah, Jehucal and Pashhur. These men were officials and nobles in Jerusalem. At face value, we could be sympathetic to the problem they brought before the king. Jerusalem was under attack and they were looking to defend it. It would not be helpful for that cause to have someone that was encouraging people to surrender, encouraging soldiers to lay down their arms. Logically, it would make sense to have that message stopped so that they could defend the city against the enemy.

While at face value this would all make sense, we cannot be sympathetic to their plan. Not when that messenger was a true prophet of the Lord. Not when that plan was to have him essentially executed by leaving him to starve in the cistern. It was God's plan for the Babylonians to attack. It was God's plan to offer this surrender as a way for people to survive. People like these officials had rejected God and rejected Jeremiah's calls to repentance and so now they would have to face the consequences. Nobles facing deportation was nothing new. Babylon had taken the first wave, including men like Daniel, nearly twenty years before. The second wave, including the prophet Ezekiel, had left ten years before. For these officials they were refusing the cross that God had given them. They preferred to follow their logic to defend the city, to hold on to what they had, rather than to choose to follow what the Lord had asked of them as his chosen people.

Next up is King Zedekiah. Again at face value we can be somewhat sympathetic to his situation and the intense pressure that he faced. Some of that came from his family history. The last good king of Judah who followed the Lord was Josiah. He was the boy king who found the book of the Law, restored temple worship and celebrations like the Passover. And while Zedekiah was the fourth king since Josiah, he was also Josiah's son. He was ten years old when his father was killed in a battle against the Egyptians. His older brother, Jehoahaz, was made king but only ruled for three months until the Pharaoh of Egypt removed him and replaced him with another older brother, Jehoiakim, who ruled for 11 years until he was captured by Babylon for rebelling against them. Next up was Zedekiah's nephew, Jehoiachin, who also only lasted for three months until the king of Babylon removed him and placed Zedekiah on the throne at the age of 21. So along with this convoluted family history comes the pressure of the world scene at that time. Egypt and Babylon were the players and the only land route between the two led through Judah. He had seen his family killed and deported as a consequence of the battle between these two nations and now he was the last one on the scene.

While these might help to explain his waffling and struggling to make these decisions, it does not excuse his behavior. Ultimately there is no evidence of faith or belief on his part. He could have stood up for Jeremiah to his officials, but he let them take him and throw him into a cistern. While allowing Jeremiah to be rescued, he still kept him imprisoned, still hoping to receive a message from the Lord that would justify his actions. While given the option to surrender, sadly he would choose to try and escape when the city finally fell. The Babylonians would capture him, kill his sons before him and then put out his eyes, taking him in chains to Babylon. 2 Chronicles gives this final assessment of Zedekiah: "He became stiff-necked and hardened his heart and would not turn to the Lord, the God of Israel" (36:13). Whether it was pressure from his family history or the geopolitical scene of the time, he gave into that pressure rather than following the Lord and taking up his cross.

This brings us to Ebed-Melech, an official in the royal palace (v. 7). That name literally means "servant of the king" so whether that was more of a title than a personal name, we are not sure. He was a Cushite and so most likely an Ethiopian. It was not uncommon to bring in men of other nations to serve in the royal household. We do not see here any specific details about his faith, but from his actions it would seem that could have been the case. Logic would have told Ebed-Melech to not get involved—protect yourself, protect your position. But he was willing to risk everything to approach the king in public, out of the palace (v. 8), and request that something be done to help Jeremiah. We know nothing of Ebed-Melech after these verses, but here he presents an example of someone willing to do the right thing no matter what the consequences, no matter what suffering may follow.

Which brings us finally to Jeremiah, the Lord's prophet. His ministry began forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem. His message was basically the same for his entire ministry and could be simply summarized: Repent of your ways and turn back to the Lord or this nation will be destroyed. In the early years of Jeremiah's ministry he would have had an ally in King Josiah, but the king's reforms did not seemingly have any lasting impact as the reigns of the next four kings would show. So imagine a forty year ministry, a career of preaching, that ultimately would end in rejection as God would have Jerusalem and the nation destroyed. On top of this cross to bear would have been the persecution seen here in the text and beyond. Can you imagine being thrown in a cistern and left to die in the mud? Even when rescued he was still imprisoned. Jeremiah would survive the fall of Jerusalem, only to become a political football, essentially kidnapped down to Egypt by those resisted who God's plans to stay and rebuild and instead chose to escape. And so here is another example of how being faithful to the Lord and following his ways will still mean taking up a cross that could even include rejection and persecution.

So where do we see ourselves in these characters? How do we compare to their actions? Sadly we can see ourselves both in the officials and in Zedekiah. If we have ever used our logic to excuse our sinful actions—it's best for me, it's makes me feel good, everyone else is doing it, then we are like those officials. If we have ever mixed up our priorities so that holding on to the things of this world whether money or glory or pleasures becomes more important than listening to what God has to say, then we are like those officials. If we have ever been conflicted because of our family, whether we feel guilty because a faithful loved one is calling us out, or we feel guilty because we have neglected to call out an unfaithful loved one, then we are like Zedekiah. If we have ever buckled under the pressure from peers or friends or what society thinks is best, then we are like Zedekiah. Carrying a cross is never easy. When we have a sinful nature we will be battling it every step of the way.

So how can we take up our crosses and be more like Ebed-Melech, risking everything to do the right thing, no matter the consequences? How can we be more like Jeremiah, enduring rejection and persecution as everything we love is destroyed around us? It all comes back to the cross of Christ, the cause of our salvation. For all the times that we stumble and fall, for all the times that we fail to follow what our God says, Jesus is there to pick us up and say, "Your sins are forgiven. Come on, keep following and I'll take you home to heaven." The more we see how much he has done for us, the more we realize what this means, then the more our love for him will grow as we continue to follow him. Following him will never be easy, whether it's from those outside forces or our battles with our own temptations. But as Peter wrote in our second lesson we can "rejoice that [we] participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that [we] may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Pe 4:13). We take up our crosses and rejoice in doing so because in the end we will be overjoyed at the final result in heaven. Amen.