

Sermon, June 21, 2020

Good morning! Welcome again to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back Aurora Celtic for special music. You probably already know them as members of the popular music group Aurora Celtic.

We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Yes, new Pandemic cases are down overall, but there are still hundreds of new cases every day in Maryland and dozens more people die every day in our state. Many, if not most of our members are in high risk groups. We do not want to endanger them unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission work commitments during these difficult and unprecedented times, there is now a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)

Meanwhile we are resuming the Adult Forum on a virtual online basis. We are discussing Race and Racism in America, like the rest of the nation is or at least should be doing right now. If you are interested, call the church office and we will send you the link to join. You can participate even without internet access if you have a smart phone or a friend or family member who does. If you are not sure how, call the office and we will put you in touch with someone who is smarter than I am about such things. Now today's Stupid Joke:

My unemployed friend interviewed for a new job Friday. The HR Director asked her, "If you could describe your value as an employee in

just one word, what would that one word be?" And she said, "Well, I always try to follow directions." She's still looking.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Teach us good Lord, to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labor and not ask for reward, except that of knowing that we do your will. Through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.

A reading from Jeremiah, the twentieth chapter.

O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him." But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed.

Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. Sing to

the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers. Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the tenth chapter.

[Jesus said to the twelve] "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.

What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. Almighty God, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Our first reading today is from the book of Jeremiah, one of the three so-called “major prophets” of the Hebrew Bible—which is our Old Testament. Mention the word prophet these days, and most people probably think “fortune teller,” or one who predicts the distant future. But human beings have never been very good at predicting the distant future, have they?

An 1876 internal company memo from Western Union President William Orton read, “the telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication.”

Thomas Watson, the chairman of the board of IBM said back in 1943 that he thought there, “Might be a world market for, Oh, maybe five computers...tops.”

In 1962 DECCA Records rejected a recording contract with a British group, named the Beatles, saying, "We don't like their sound, and besides, guitar music is on its way out."

Fortunately, Biblical prophecy was mostly NOT about predicting the distant future. Prophets were God’s mouthpieces or spokespersons, who spent most of their time recalling the past and speaking on behalf of God to the PRESENT situation.

They typically warned that what was going on NOW was going to have dire consequences soon. And unlike modern palm and tarot card readers and fortune tellers, their warnings were nearly always ignored.

Socially, the biblical prophets were a weird group of misfits. And they were mostly a very anxious people, none more so than Jeremiah. As Aldous Huxley said, “The most distressing thing that could happen to a prophet would be to be proved wrong. And the next most distressing thing would be to be proved right.”

In today’s reading Jeremiah wasn’t really looking much to the future. He was just being very cranky about the present.

These days American Judaism, Catholics and mainline Protestant churches all have serious shortages of qualified clergy. So much so that some Jewish schools now offer accelerated two-year post-Bachelor’s Rabbinical programs. Meanwhile many Catholic churches are closing. And in our own ELCA 25 percent of all pulpits in the country are vacant. Last year more than four hundred ELCA pastors retired, and there were only two hundred newly-ordained seminary grads to replace them. And those numbers will surely get worse, because half of our current pastors are likely to retire within the next few years.

In case you are interested, the seven ELCA seminaries are doing all they can to attract potential ministry students for now and for the future. Tuition, which was fairly high when I attended, is now virtually free. But I doubt you’ll find any mention of today’s first lesson from Jeremiah or for that matter our gospel reading from Matthew on their websites or in their recruiting materials.

Because based on what Jeremiah said here about his call to ministry and also what Jesus warned would happen to some of the folks he commissions as missionaries, I wouldn’t be surprised if most would-be seminarians would forget all about trying to serve God, and instead check-out indeed.com or the want ads.

Now you’d think Jeremiah would have known what he was getting into, his father being a high priest and all. Preacher’s kids, or as my mother

called them PK's, all know that ministry isn't an easy job despite what others think. Did you know that I really DO work more than one hour a week? Honest! I've heard many of my peers complain right along with Jeremiah that ministry is mostly a thankless job. Of course I was used to that, because in my previous career as a health care provider I did things like root canals and mouth surgeries for a living." When my daily tasks were completed, nobody lined up at my office door to shake my hand as they left.

Besides, like it or not, when God calls you to ministry, you don't really have much say in the matter. And Jeremiah should have known what was up all along. His name in Hebrew is yirmiyahu, which literally means, "God raised (him) up." So he certainly knew he was NOT going to dental school.

Scholars call today's reading part of Jeremiah's sixth lament—(or fifth or seventh, depending on who is counting.) Lament means, "An expression of grief or sorrow." You see, the prophet hated his job and complained about it throughout the book. Yirmiyahu is often called the "weeping," or "broken-hearted" prophet. And like most of us when we're down, angry and frustrated, he didn't mince his words.

Our English translation significantly softens the language of Jeremiah's laments. He didn't really say today that in his call to be a prophet God "enticed" and then "overpowered" him. In the original Hebrew in fact he accused God of seducing and then raping him. Yikes.

Yirmiyahu said God made him the laughingstock of his community, where he was constantly scorned and mocked, even by his so-called friends. No wonder we're short of ministers. (And also dentists.) Some call these verses the most blasphemous spoken by ANYONE, in the entire Bible.

We conveniently stopped our reading at what sounds like a happy hopeful ending "sing to the Lord—praise the Lord."

But in the next few verses Jeremiah plunges right back to the depths of his despair, wishing he had been killed in the womb and never born at all.

Harsh as they sound, according to ancient rabbinic writings, the rabbis weren't offended by yirmiyahu's words. In fact they suggest we cut him some slack. There's nothing wrong with being frank and honest when you are talking to God, even complaining to God—and it's not like you could really hide your emotions or frustrations from God anyway.

Jeremiah had good reason to be both hurt and aggravated—he was raised-up to be God's spokesperson at a time when God had some pretty unpleasant things to say. Back in chapter seven God explained Jeremiah's job description to him this way: You are going to tell people exactly what I tell you to say; and then they are not going to listen to you. Ouch.

The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that Jeremiah's laments were not just aimed at ministers and missionaries. They are words of warning and wisdom for everyone who dares to do God's work in the world. And God's work is more than just standing up here preaching and leading worship and prayers. It's looking out for and taking care of your fellow human beings who need your help.

In the past few days I have been blessed to participate in a couple informal events held by a local volunteer group bent on doing just that. They call themselves the Garrett County Freedom Crusaders, and like Jeremiah they are just trying to do the things their God would want them to do, which doesn't always make them popular with their friends and neighbors either.

They are White, Black and Hispanic. Straight and LGBT. They are grandparents, middle-aged, and young folks who even bring their kids along. Their leaders are young, inspired, and well-spoken. They are willing to do and say what is right, even though to some it may not be

popular. Their goal seems to be to raise awareness and make life easier for those who are often unwelcome or marginalized in society, much like Jesus did. And like Jeremiah they too have been insulted, taunted and threatened for their efforts.

St. Mark's building is technically closed these days. But our Church is not. We continue our ministries that help feed hungry poor children. We support the Dove Center, that shelters and counsels abused and broken families. We support and volunteer at Christian Crossing, which among other things, helps cash-strapped families and individuals through crisis situations.

We hope it is safe to reopen our building soon. Meanwhile, we continue our uninterrupted service to God through our assistance to our brothers and sisters who are in need. Not so much inside these walls. But out in our God-given world, which is hurting.

Nobody is really sure what, in the end, happened to Jeremiah. Of course everything occurred just like the scorned and hated prophet said it would. Judah fell to Babylon. Many Jews were slaughtered, and others carted off to slavery.

Tradition says that after Jerusalem was sacked and its temple destroyed Jeremiah moved to Egypt. They say he continued his stellar career as a prophet there, which was capped-off by being stoned to death by an angry mob. I'm not surprised.

But it's nice to know that God values us and loves us in spite of ourselves. And understands when we get a little frustrated with our own situations. And even rudely mouth off to our God now and then, like Jeremiah did. God is even willing to forgive us for that. Because to the God who truly loves us, we are not just two-for-a-penny sparrows.

We're family.

Amen