

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in Christ Jesus this day. The title for today's sermon is "Preaching under the Cross" and is from the Old Testament lesson: Jeremiah, chapter 15. Let us pray... Amen.

In the eyes of the world, things did not turn out well for Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. He suffered opposition, imprisonment, and eventually death because he was a preacher of God's Word. We are often tempted to rejoice smugly that we do not have to suffer the sort of miseries he experienced. But every faithful pastor has met the wrath of a hearer who was offended by some truth that he preached or practiced in his ministry. And every Christian has known the skepticism, the scorn, the dismissal that comes from taking a stand on some unpopular truth in God's Word. It turns out, Jeremiah's prophecy is as fresh and relevant today as it's ever been. Today also, faithful preaching and hearing of God's Word attracts opposition and suffering, but also delivers the precious promises of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Looking at the lesion, Jeremiah complains of sufferings, and God answers. Jeremiah complained that the prophetic office he was called to was difficult and lonely. And can you really blame him. By most earthly standards he did not have a great job. To start with, Jeremiah was made a prophet against his will (1:6): he didn't choose it. Instead God found him, commissioned him, and sent him to a people set against God and hostile to God's Word. Jeremiah had to stand up against numerous lying and deceiving prophets. While they were preaching peace and security Jeremiah was to preach judgment, war, and suffering to the nation and to lead people to repentance. Judah didn't want to hear it. Still, Jeremiah was sent and said to them; **"Thus says the LORD concerning this people: "They have loved to wander thus; they have not restrained their feet; therefore the LORD does not accept them; now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins."**(Jer 14:10) He did and suffered their persecutions as we heard him say, **"O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors."**(Jer 15:15)

In many ways Jeremiah felt like a failure. His hearers did not believe him when he spoke for God. In their sinful arrogance and unbelief they fought against Jeremiah while rejecting God's Word. The result was God did not listen to Jeremiah when he tried to intercede on behalf of the people (14:11; 15:1). And so, Jeremiah was regarded as a curse in the land (15:10).

At the beginning of the Old Testament reading Jeremiah complained that he bore reproach on account of God's Word (15:15). Jeremiah greatly suffered for bringing God's Word to the people. The reproach, criticism, and persecution, he felt were too much for him to bear. The king and most of the nation were set against him. They reviled him and cursed him for no other reason than he spoke God's Word.

So God filled Jeremiah with indignation towards the people of Judah for their rejection of God. Jeremiah would rather have preached peace and salvation to his own people instead of having to constantly preach damnation. He asks, "Why is my pain, my anguish ceaseless?" The term for 'pain', נֹכַח, which Jeremiah uses is only used 6 times in the Old Testament. It denotes agonizing, extreme pain (Job 2:13; 16:6; Ps 39:2-3; Is. 17:11; 65:14). His wound, the blow he has suffered, is incurable, refuses to be healed.

Overwhelmed with grief, Jeremiah plunges from the heights of joy and rejoicing in verse 16 into the deepest depth of darkness and despair. He charges God of lying to him. Jeremiah compares God to "waters that fail," like a brook that runs dry in summer, when water is needed most; the opposite of a perennial stream (Amos 5:24; cp. Job 6:15-18). That is the language of unbelief! Here Jeremiah's flesh speaks, that "flesh which is hostile to God" (Rom. 8:7). "The fact that the flesh happens to be that of a believing child of God does not make it any better than the flesh of the unbeliever. David's flesh made him an adulterer and a murderer; Peter's, a renegade; Jeremiah's flesh made him a blasphemer. To charge the God of the Amen (Is 65:16) with being a liar, to accuse the Fountain of Life (Ps 36:9) and Living Waters (Jer 2:13) with being like waters that fails, untrustworthy, that is blasphemy, whether spoken by wicked men (Ps. 10:4-13; 73:11) or by the flesh of God's own prophet. The fact that his patience was sorely tested until it reached the breaking point does not excuse him. He broke down because his trust in God was fast disintegrating, so that Satan was successful in seducing this chosen vessel of God into, doubt, despair, blasphemy." (Laetsch, Jeremiah, CPH, p.152)

God responded to Jeremiah's complaint with a call to repentance and with Gospel promises. God did not immediately reject Jeremiah for his blasphemy. Instead God called Jeremiah to repent of his doubt: "**If you return, I will restore you, you shall stand before me**" or more literally, "**If you turn and I turn you, you shall stand before me**" (v 19; cf. 31:18). God turns Jeremiah back to Him, God turns him back to His Word, the Word Jeremiah ate and rejoiced in just a few verses previous.

Jeremiah confessed that God's words were a joy to give him *just a couple of verses earlier* (v 16), *how they* promising salvation, deliverance, redemption (vv 20–21). *So here God again* promises to establish and bless Jeremiah in his vocation and office (vv 19–21).

God's words here bring great comfort because Christian preachers and hearers often experience the prophet's troubles, but they also receive his promises. Christian preachers can identify with Jeremiah, both in their sins and doubts, and also in failures. Preachers may struggle with the awareness of their own shortcomings, failures, and sins. They may sometimes be plagued with doubt and despair. Sometimes the Word of God may seem to receive little success, and their own prayers may seem to fall to the ground unheard.

Christian hearers also share in the reproach of the Gospel. As hearers, they may share in the struggles of their pastors and even suffer the same persecution (1 Pet 4:12–19). They and their preachers sometimes complain to God and question His faithfulness. They may ask if God is sleeping at the wheel, or in the easy chair in the corner... But He promises us that He will never leave us or forsake us (Matt 28:20). We question because of a lack of fear, love, and trust in God.

God calls us to repentance, as he did Jeremiah. He turns us so that we are turned away from sin and unbelief and now look to him for grace and mercy. God turns us to where He promises to be and where He gives us great and precious promises: in His Word and Sacraments.

In addition, He tells us that He is the agent who does the turning and who makes us stand before Him. He does this through the work of the Holy Spirit through our hearing of His Word and receiving His Sacrament. God makes the ministry of the Gospel a fortified and impregnable city for us, which is able to withstand the attacks of the devil, the world, and even our sinful flesh.

Through Christ, He bestows salvation, deliverance, and redemption to all who believe His Word. While the world may mock and reject His Word, to us who believe, who are saved, it is the power of God!"(1 Cor 1:18)

There is also something more in today's Old Testament reading. In Jeremiah's words we also recognize the suffering of Christ and the salvation He died to give us. Jeremiah was not alone facing Judah. You are never alone in this world either. Christ Himself would one day bear our reproach (v 15), be filled with indignation at our disregard of God's Word (v 17), and suffer our perpetual pain and incurable wound (v 18). And He has. His blood is our full redemption price; His death is our deliverance; His resurrection is our salvation and justification.

Preachers of the Gospel share in the sufferings of Christ (Col 1:24), bearing the cross of Christ in the vocation of the Holy Ministry. But in this ministry, the promises given to Jeremiah are delivered to preacher and hearer alike, and Christ is revealed to give mercy to those who suffer for His sake.

All Christians bear the cross for the sake of Christ. Jesus clearly tells Peter this in today's Gospel: "**If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.**"(Matthew 16:24) But where the cross of Christ is willingly carried and the precious Gospel of Jesus' cross is preached and heard and believed, there the Church of Christ stands before God (15:19) and overcomes all her oppressors (vv 20–21). By bearing our cross, we acknowledge our guilt for our sins. We acknowledge we could not stand before God apart from Christ and the free gift of forgiveness and salvation He earned in our place. Our salvation is there nailed to the cross, bleeding and dying in our place. Jesus is our hope, our only hope in this fallen world. He is also the Rock on which we stand by faith when this world sends its worst to tempt, challenge, and persecute us for our God given faith.

But, if you are baptized into Christ's death, as St. Paul writes, then you will live as Christ lived, suffer as Christ suffered, and die as Christ died... and be raised from the dead as Christ was raised from the dead. Where is God in your suffering? He is bearing it for you. Where is God when you do what is evil? He is receiving it for you. Where is God when you say, "I've done too much, and even sinned against God!"? Jesus is on the cross carrying all your guilt and shame for you.

Jeremiah's example and words direct us back to the faithful preaching of the Word of God, where Christ is revealed and salvation is delivered. There we find ourselves in a strong and impregnable city, where we live secure in God's eternal forgiveness and love. Amen.

* This sermon's outline is based on Concordia Pulpit Resources, Volume 24, Part 3, Series A, by Rev. John E. Hill, STM, pastor, Mount Hope Lutheran Church, Casper, Wyoming. Also material used in this sermon is from Laetsch, Jeremiah, Concordia Publishing house, 1952.