

The Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
February 3, 2013
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Jeremiah 17:5-8

This is what the LORD says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. “But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

A British ship, the largest and most sumptuous luxury liner to ever sail, steamed out of Southampton bound for New York on April 10, 1912. This ship called the *Titanic* was a monument to technology and elegance. It was a marvel and appeared to be one of the best innovations mankind had to offer. There is a pretty famous quote which has been talked about and repeated many times. It is said to have come from one of the deck hands reassuring a boarding passenger. On the day the *Titanic* was to take off he supposedly said: “*God Himself could not sink this ship.*” If you know the history or have seen the movie you understand why this quote has gotten so much attention. For the great *Titanic* hit an iceberg and ended up in the bottom of the Atlantic instead of in a port near New York. Over half the passengers on board never made it alive.

Whether or not the words about God being able to sink the ship were actually said or only a legend, the truth remains that the builders of the *Titanic* were very confident in what they had made. Confidence was so high that the owners and builders rejected plans for as many as 64 lifeboats. Instead, they brought 20, which was only enough for about half of the passengers. Even as the reports of the *Titanic* disaster began to reach America early in the morning of April 15, 1912, the Vice President of the White Star Line in New York stated, without qualification, “**We place absolute confidence in the *Titanic*. We believe that the boat is unsinkable.**”

So dear Christian friends, the Lord wants us to think about where we put our confidence. In whom or on what do we place our trust? There are really only two places to turn, two paths to go down; two different choices of where our confidence rests. And trusting one of these will end up with worse results than the *Titanic*. So as we look to this Word of God consider with me this morning this very important question: **Do we trust in our own strength or in our saving Lord?**

Jeremiah served the Lord in Judah and Jerusalem in the days leading up to their destruction by the hands of the Babylonians. He had a difficult and interesting ministry to put it mildly. There is a reason he is referred to as the weeping prophet. God told Jeremiah not to marry because famine and sword were coming. God ordered Jeremiah not to go to any funerals or houses of mourning because the Lord was withdrawing His pity from the people. He also commanded His prophet to stay away from houses of feasting (no Super Bowl parties for Jeremiah) because the Lord wanted the people to understand that He will soon put an end to the sounds of joy and gladness. Why?

“Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.”

The people in Judah and Jerusalem had placed their confidence in all the wrong places. They turned away from the Lord. They worshipped man-made idols. They thought no one could ever defeat or destroy them because of who they were and where they lived. When they began to sense some danger they turned to human solutions such as an alliance with Egypt to save them. Even their spiritual security rested in what they did. After all, they continued to go through the motions of holy days, and sacrifices and religious festivals. They had the temple and were God’s chosen people. Plenty of false prophets were right there to tell them what they wanted to hear – that they would be just fine. In short, they trusted in their own strength.

So the Lord sends Jeremiah to tell the people God is about to withdraw His blessings from them. They will be cursed. They will see where depending on their own flesh gets them. They will be fruitless and empty. The picture used here is that of a Judean wasteland where a single bush struggles to live and the desert land along the Dead Sea where no one lives. This is an accurate picture of life without God – with His blessings. This describes those without faith – whose hearts have turned away from the Lord. These are the bitter results of their misplaced trust. So it is for all who trust in their own strength – this is the sad consequences both in this life and the next.

How often do we foolishly fall into the same trap of relying on our own strength? It is the American way, isn’t it? We want to have confidence in ourselves, don’t we? I typed in do-it-yourself and suddenly 800 million references popped up with every self help book and reference to teach us how to do the job ourselves. There is no problem we cannot solve, no force we can not master or turn to our use. We can do anything we want if we work hard and put our minds to it. Isn’t this what we have been taught and told? How often do we think of ourselves, especially when we are young and strong, as being kind of like the *Titanic*? Have we ever foolishly thought we are unsinkable? When a problem comes up where is the first place we turn? Don’t we have to sadly admit that too often we first turn to human solutions?

What about when it comes to our spiritual needs? Does such thinking ever creep in when it comes to our sins? Do we think we can actually do something about them ourselves? When we start thinking we are able to somehow earn God’s favor for what we have done, when we think we are more deserving than others because of who we are, when we start to believe we can do anything at all when it comes to our salvation, we are in big trouble. Then we are heading down the wrong path and are getting on a sinking ship. For ***“Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD.”***

Thank the Lord, the saving Lord, that there is another way – His way. ***“But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.”*** This is why the Lord was sending Jeremiah and also the destruction that was about to come upon the people of Judah. He wanted to turn them back to Him. He wanted them to put their confidence and place their trust back where it belonged – in the Lord. This is the same Lord who made them into a great nation, miraculously rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and brought them to the Promised Land. This is the same Lord who promised to

take care of all their spiritual needs by sending them a Savior to be their righteousness and to take all their sins away. This is the saving Lord whose promises and love never failed them.

This is the same Lord you and I have come to know and love by grace. We have seen just how far His love would go to save us – all the way to the cross and grave! We have seen just how sure and certain His promises really are – as we look into the tomb of Jesus and see that it is empty! So we put our confidence, all of our confidence, in our saving Lord’s unmovable grace and unfailing love. We place our trust, all our trust, in our saving Lord’s unmatched strength and unshakable promises. When our trust is in the Lord we are always blessed! ***“He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”***

Please understand what these words are and are not promising. God is not saying we will never have those days when life grabs us and tosses us right down on the mat. You know the feeling, don’t you? The times you feel you have been punched right in the gut, the times you are thrown flat on your back, the times you realize your own strength has failed you. If you haven’t faced those days you will. When you get the bad doctor’s report, the phone call you never want, or the pink slip you tried to avoid. Whether our thorn in the flesh is financial trouble or health problems or relationship issues or whatever it may be, God wants us to recognize the same thing the apostle Paul came to see – God’s grace is sufficient for us. This is life with the Lord – our leaves are always green because forgiveness, life, and heaven are ours in Jesus. There is nothing to fear, nothing to worry about even in a year of drought, for the Lord watches over our lives and guides them in a way that is always for our good. In Christ, our lives will never fail to bear fruit.

So do we trust in our own strength or in our saving Lord? Do we want to rely on what we must do or on what Jesus has already done? Where does our confidence rest? Dear friends, asking if we want to trust in our own strength is like asking if we want to board a sinking ship. Frankly, I’d much rather be carried on eagles wings as I put my trust in the saving Lord. I’d rather say with the psalmist David: ***“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God” (20)***. Trusting in the Lord and Him alone we will make it safely to our final and most glorious destination. Amen.