

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 23, 2012
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Jeremiah 38:1-13

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, “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.’ 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.’” 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.” “He is in your hands,” King Zedekiah answered. “The king can do nothing to oppose you.” 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. 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, Ebed-Melech went out of the palace and said to him, “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.” 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.” 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. 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, and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.

I worked in several different factories as I made my way through school and there was one in which I came in after school to clean. Part of my job meant going through each part of the factory to wipe off the phones and desks and take out all the trash. Toward the back of the factory there were two men who worked in an office there who were constantly using the name of Jesus – and they were not holding worship or singing hymns of praise. Almost every other word was Jesus this or that, of course surrounded by vulgar cursing and swearing. It always really bothered me to hear them using Jesus’ name this way. So one day I finally got the courage to say: “*Could you please not use Jesus’ name in that way when I am around? That is a name that means a lot to me.*”

While their language was still bad they no longer used Jesus’ name when I was around. But from then on I could tell these guys would snicker a bit behind my back. The talks we used to have about sports ended. Many times their balled up paper seemed to conveniently miss the trash can I came to empty. I think they had known I was studying to be a pastor before, but now they didn’t appear to want to have anything to do with me.

You could probably tell me similar stories of being shunned, mocked, made fun of, and persecuted because of Jesus. It happens to children at school who follow God's Word instead of the peer pressure to sin. Perhaps you have experienced this kind of ridicule at work, from your neighbors, or for some even by family members. When we suffer for Christ, when we are persecuted for listening to God's Word, when the world hates us for following Jesus this is called a Christian cross. I pray we learn to gladly pick ours up each day, deny ourselves, and follow Jesus. Like Jeremiah, I pray we understand: **It is alright to be pitiful for Christ.**

Jeremiah was the Lord's prophet who served in Judah. These were tough times for Israel, the last years before the Lord allowed Babylon to devastate Judah, the temple, and the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah spoke the Lord's truth while many false prophets were quick to tell the evil kings what they wanted to hear. So Jeremiah was persecuted. Once King Jehoiakim took the scroll on which Jeremiah had written all the words of the Lord and he cut it up into little pieces and burned it up in the firepot. More recently Jeremiah was falsely accused of deserting to the Babylonians. The people in their anger with Jeremiah had him beaten and imprisoned.

He remained there a long time until King Zedekiah, placed on the throne by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to be nothing more than a puppet king, called for the prophet. He wanted to know if there was any word from the Lord. Jeremiah told Zedekiah the truth that he would be handed over to Babylon. Then Jeremiah asked him: ***"Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, 'The King of Babylon will not attack you or this land.'*** You see Jerusalem had been under siege and surrounded by the Babylonians. Jeremiah wants to know where all those false prophets have gone who were foretelling peace and safety for the city and who now had egg on their faces after saying Babylon would not attack. Then Jeremiah pleaded not to go back to the prison where he was staying for he would die there. Zedekiah placed Jeremiah in the courtyard of the guard where he would be given bread from the street of the bakers each day.

This is where Jeremiah remained as we come to the words of our text. While under guard in the courtyard Jeremiah kept serving the Lord as a faithful prophet. I mentioned the city was under siege, but the Babylonians were temporarily distracted by the Egyptians who Zedekiah foolishly tried to make an arrangement with for help. Jeremiah predicted the Egyptian efforts will fail and Babylon will turn their full attention back to Jerusalem and will eventually destroy it. Jeremiah was telling the people: ***"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.'*** 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.'***"

This is why the officials in the city of Jerusalem are again upset with Jeremiah. They complain to King Zedekiah: ***"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."*** These government officials are mad because they realize some of the soldiers are disheartened by Jeremiah's message. Perhaps some were even listening to the word of the Lord and turning themselves over to the Babylonians. So they tell Zedekiah that Jeremiah should be put to death. And Zedekiah, weak and without much resolve, said the prophet was in their hands. So they take the prophet Jeremiah and lower him with ropes into a cistern

without any water in it. They leave Jeremiah in a pit of mud without food and water. They just leave him there. So the prophet of the Lord sinks into mud in a dark pit with no one around except for the vermin that crawled around him. He is left there to die.

Now that is literally pitiful. How else could you describe Jeremiah as he sat alone in this muddy cistern? Sometimes we too can look kind of pitiful as the world attempts to take advantage and mock and ridicule and despise those who speak and follow God's Word. But it is one thing to look and feel pretty pitiful because of our sins because our sins do make us pitiful, but it is a completely different thing when we look pitiful for doing what is right. That's exactly what Peter writes about in our second lesson today. He says if you suffer it should not be as some kind of criminal for then you deserve it. But ***'if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.'*** Peter says we should not be surprised as if something strange is happening to us when we suffer for Jesus in this world. Jesus tells us that will happen. In fact Peter writes that when we suffer for Jesus' sake we are to rejoice! He writes: ***"If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed."*** Such suffering is a reminder that we belong to Jesus. It is alright to be pitiful for Christ.

I'm not going to tell you Jeremiah as he was in that pit suffering for the Lord and for the sake of Christ sat there rejoicing. I do not know what Jeremiah did and thought as he sat there, left for dead. We are not told. But I do know the Lord is always on the side of those who are faithful to His Word. I do know the Lord did not forget about His prophet. I do know that God will never leave any of His children all alone. I do know God would work out even this for Jeremiah's own good. We do know the Lord used a man by the name of Ebed-Melech to rescue Jeremiah from this muddy pit. This man was not even a Jew but a Cushite who took mercy on Jeremiah. He went to King Zedekiah and informed him of how the officials acted wickedly toward the prophet of God and how Jeremiah was left to starve to death. So Ebed-Melech was given orders to take thirty men and go get Jeremiah before he dies. They went & saved a poor suffering Jeremiah who probably was so weak that he wasn't even able to pull himself up so they had to pull him with the rags and ropes wrapped around him. ***"They pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard."***

Immediately, I am reminded of some of the closing words of the Apostle Paul's written in his last letter to Timothy. ***"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."*** (4) The Lord took care of his faithful prophet by rescuing him from his pitiful state. Now I am not just talking about how the Lord provided Jeremiah relief by having him lifted out of that cistern. I'm talking about a far greater rescue. The Lord saved Jeremiah from the pit of hell. The Lord saved Jeremiah the very same way He has saved you and me. He provided us with the Lord our Righteousness. He sent Jesus to live a perfect life in our place and the world hated Jesus for it. The Lord forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more because Jesus became the most pitiful of all. Our Savior became sin for us taking on Himself our guilt, our shame, our ugliness so that He might suffer and die for it all. Look at the cross and witness how pitiful Jesus was there so that we have forgiveness and life. Now we are not pitied more than all people because Christ has indeed been raised from the dead! We have hope beyond life here on earth.

Because of that I pray we are not afraid to be pitiful for Christ. In Acts chapter 5 there is an account that has always amazed me. Jesus' apostles were taken before the Sanhedrin, their lives were threatened if they kept telling others about Jesus, they were also severely flogged (which was not pleasant by any means), and then sent away. Then we read these words: ***"The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."*** I pray we realize it is now our turn to live for and love Jesus who first loved us. It is our turn to suffer for the Savior who suffered and died to give us heaven. It is our turn to pick up our Christian crosses, whatever they may be, and follow Him. Like Jeremiah, like the disciples, it is alright to be pitiful for Christ now, for the day is coming when we will share in His glory. So let the world despise and leave us for they have left our Savior too. I pray Jesus always mean a whole lot to us for by His life and death He has lifted us from the pit of hell and He will bring us safely into His heavenly kingdom. Amen.