

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26:1-8 ; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

*Come and Die*

It's been a rough week in Jerusalem. A while back, Jeremiah preached a sermon at the temple, prophesying its destruction, and he's still catching flack for what he said. Soon, there will be a trial where his life is on the line. He'll be acquitted, but just barely. He'll end his life in exile, on the borders of Egypt. In the meantime, he's being harassed and persecuted by the folks in power and even by his family and friends from his hometown; and so, Jeremiah is lamenting. This morning he's saying things like, (Jer 15:10) "Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me." He's even accusing God, "Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail." (15:18)

*A Deceitful Brook?*

He's thinking of God's call to him, sending him to pull things down on the way to building them up again. And promising to protect him from the backlash that would surely come. So, he's wondering where the protection is. God seems "like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail."

Jeremiah had watched a young king, Josiah, bring many improvements: pushing back paganism, cleaning up the temple, restoring the liturgies. But Josiah's son, the willful, selfish, and arrogant young king Jehoiakim, has allowed paganism to refresh itself. So, God sent Jeremiah out on the

streets and into the temple precincts to call the people back from idolatry and paganism.

When he called Jeremiah, the Lord put out his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth; and the Lord said to him,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.  
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.” —1:9–10

And the Lord promised,

And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you. —1:18–19

But, Jeremiah has had nothing but trouble ever since he opened his mouth to deliver God's message. The brook of God's protection seems very dried up indeed. Egypt is threatening from the south, Babylon from the north; there's corruption in the palace and in the temple; and God is threatening destruction and exile.

Sound familiar? You tried to explain Easter to your brother-in-law and wound up with a slice of Easter ham in your face? Or, you tried to explain the moral dangers of Trump to a neighbor and found yourself in a shouting match? It's not easy, or perhaps not even safe, bringing a message of resurrection when the headlines speak of death, or a message of moral judgement to a person who dismisses it as fake news. The Word of the Year last year, according to the Oxford Dictionaries,

was “post-truth.” When things get this bad it’s time for lament. Lament is not complaining (as in the case of the weather or the traffic). It does not wonder where God is in all this mess. Lament recognizes that God is indeed here; if not openly, then behind the scenes—being anonymous, as one of my Jewish friends puts it. And so, lament addresses God with the pain or loneliness or sorrow. Lately, I’ve been lamenting with Job and Naomi. Or, in Jeremiah’s lament:

Why is my pain unceasing,  
my wound incurable,  
refusing to be healed?

Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook,  
like waters that fail. —15:18

The Psalm we recited today begins in lament, not quite so sharply put as is Jeremiah’s:

Give judgment for me, O Lord,  
for I have lived with integrity;  
I have trusted in the Lord and have not faltered.  
I have not sat with the worthless,  
nor do I consort with the deceitful. —26:1,4

So, when you come in pain or despair to St. Peter’s for worship; somehow wounded with the affairs of the world or your latest family crisis, listen for the lament in the Psalms and make it your lament. For instance, today: “I have not sat with the worthless, nor do I consort with the deceitful. . . [so] Give judgment for me, O Lord.”

*The way of the cross*

As Jesus sits and talks with his disciples, the shadow of Jeremiah looms in the background.

Another outspoken prophet is headed for trial and, this time, death on a cross. Indeed, Jesus is the prophet Israel has been waiting for, prefigured in Jeremiah. And he calls his disciples to take up their crosses, join him in self denial, suffering, persecution, and, in some cases, death.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every [one] must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of [our] encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a [person], he bids [that person] come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world.” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, 79)

### *Taking the Cross Today*

So, how do we take up our cross, answer Jesus’ call to come and die? The Christians of Rome faced the same question. Pressured by the surrounding Roman culture and finding tensions among themselves (both Jewish and Gentile Christians, the latter from several ethnic cultures around the empire who were brought to Rome as slaves). How do you deny yourself, or as Bonhoeffer put it “surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death?”

In our reading from Romans today, we heard: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.”

Imagine a Roman Jew and a Gentile slave, recently captured somewhere in the East and brought to Rome, both of them now Christians, outdoing one another in showing honor. This would have been one way to practice mutual service within the house churches of Rome. Paul is saying, “this is how you live among yourselves before the watching world.”

More. As you walk your neighborhood or toil at your computer in an office or tell someone about Jesus: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Imagine, when someone, who’s been on you because you’re a Christian, suffers a loss and is weeping. Can you weep with that person, or will you just walk by? Paul writes, “No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.’ ”

And all this is not just so that we are nice to one another and smiling in the face of persecution. This is how we follow God’s call to work out the restoration of the world that Jeremiah spoke of (the building up and planting part of his message; the promise that God would again bless and finally set the world right). This is how we live out the fruit of Christ’s death. That death was the turning point of history, the time when God turned us all towards participating in the reversal of all that that bite of the forbidden fruit started. He’s called us to do the kingdom building, just at he called Adam and Eve to nourish and guard the earth. He hasn’t given up on human beings, he’s

enlisted us: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mt 16:24) As we work, God works in and through us, in the mysterious balance of Christ’s body in the world.

As Anglican Bishop Tom Wright puts it, “The whole point of God’s saving rule, as Jesus understood it, is that the saving rule of this God—the God of gentle, generous, overwhelming love, whose kingdom-way was articulated in the Sermon the Mount—cannot be established by *force majeure*, but only by its proper means: suffering, self-giving love.” (*After You Believe*, 113) Or, as Bonhoeffer wrote, Christ calls us to come and die.

As you have heard these words from Jeremiah, Psalms, Matthew, and Romans, now re-read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that you may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life—the new heavens and the new earth, which God has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

### *When Disaster Strikes*

Before we finish. . .It’s been a rough week in Houston. It’s a time for lament; for weeping with those who weep. Bishop Andrew Doyle, of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas writes, “I am very present to the sadness, fear, uncertainty, and grief that fill our minds and hearts in the wake of the hurricane. . . .Truly this storm has brought all of us to our knees, and our only recourse is to join King David in his plea for mercy: ‘Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck.’ ”

(Psalm 69:1) And so, we weep with those who weep.

How do our readings today guide the Body of Christ's further response to hurricanes and other major disasters? What does cross-bearing look like in those cases? Here are just a few examples from the last few days.

Many Christian relief organizations and churches from across the country moved personnel and supplies into the Houston area and will be there helping for months; perhaps years. Churches in Philadelphia sent rapid-response teams to Texas, and are planning for the time soon when evacuees from Texas will come here, needing housing, clothing, and other help. Volunteers and communities are denying themselves to restore life to others.

The Episcopal Diocese of Texas sent spiritual care teams to the Brown Convention Center that still houses 9,000 plus evacuees. Dozens of deacons and lay chaplains went to the hardest hit neighborhoods to offer comfort and emergency funds to people who were flooded.

“Our response will come in several ways, and will be long term,” said Bishop Andy Doyle. “We will reach out to our communities. . .and the diocesan staff will work diligently and urgently to get our affected congregations up and running so that they can serve their immediate communities.

“Two of the most powerful images in Scripture have Jesus Christ exercising authority over the sea [walking on water, commanding the waves]. . . .The point being made by the biblical author is

clear: namely, that God's power to save, renew, heal, and restore is infinitely greater than the sea's power to destroy. The God we know in Jesus Christ forever sits "enthroned amidst the flood (Psalm 29:10). . . .It is with this hope that we wait for healing together and, in concert with our Baptismal vows, we pledge to be conduits through whom God brings healing and renewal to others."

Let's end with a prayer written by Bp Doyle of Houston:

*Heavenly Father, in your Word you have given us a vision of that holy City where the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea: Behold and visit, we pray, the cities of the earth devastated by Hurricane Harvey. Sustain those displaced by the storm with food, drink, and all other bodily necessities of life. We especially remember before you all poor and neglected persons it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them; that, among all the changes and chances of this mortal life, we may ever be defended by your gracious and ready help; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.*