

**“In the Depths – God is With You” based on Matthew 16:21-28 and Jeremiah 15:15-21**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, September 3, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Back in January, we read together a piece of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in which he said the cross is foolishness to the Gentiles, and a stumbling block to Jews. The idea of someone honoring, let alone worshiping, someone hanged on a cross, is foolish to anyone who believes in the power of human accomplishment and a stumbling block to anyone fixated on preserving God’s dignity against human attack.

So, it is hard for us to imagine when those things are so common in our lives that in truth, we don’t have to earn love. Yes, we don’t have to achieve honor to please God. We don’t have to protect God from other people. And it is hard too, for us trust that God is here with us. We don’t have to defend God, or our own belief in this God.

Both of today’s readings present a story of God’s wisdom being greater than our own, and God’s loving presence being at the heart of all of God’s promises – that’s what is good news. For Jeremiah, knowing that God called him is, as he puts it, the “joy and gladness of his heart.” He is a prophet tasked with speaking the word of God, directly from God. But you know what, he has not been telling people what they want to hear.

The people loved the false prophets who claimed that God was saying, “You will not see the sword or suffer famine. Indeed, I will give you lasting peace in this place.” The people want to hear that the Lord, will vindicate them, raise them up, yet God promises the people of Judah defeat as the consequences, of their sin.

In our reading today, Jeremiah, after being rejected and despised by the people, he begins to act like his enemies. The prophet boasts of all he has done for God. He says, “You’re patient with them?” But, but, “I’ve suffered insults for your sake!” The prophet wants victory against the people, but these are people who are already facing defeat as he just told them. He says he wasn’t in the mocking assembly, nor did he rejoice in the hand God. He blames God for his indignation and anger. He calls God a lie.

Yet, the God who promises to send all of Judah into exile for their sins a few verses earlier, shows mercy in response to Jeremiah’s angry lament. God calls Jeremiah back. If you return, literally, if you turn around, and figuratively, if you repent, I will bring you back, the Lord says to Jeremiah, and you will remain with me. He tells the prophet to let the people return to him, but he should not return to them. He should act like them again. He says the people will fight him but will not prevail. The Lord promises – I will be with you.

How do we reconcile this? In one instance an entire nation will be taken away, God says because of their sins, and yet, here Jeremiah calls God a liar, but the Lord says, I’m going to stick around with you. The truth is that the Lord is gracious to both Jeremiah and to the people. The point of exile – the reason Babylon, Assyria, and other nations, took people from their homelands and moved them elsewhere – was to erase their identity. It was to erase their gods, first by removing the people from their temples, and second, by installing a new ruling class, by sending in people of the conquering empire to replace those taken out. Yet, we still know the people of Judah. God never left them. God went with the Jews into exile and remains with them. The promise remains – I will be with you.

Through Jeremiah, God is warning the people that this will happen – giving them a chance. They can turn back to God, but the people of Judah in Jeremiah’s day lean instead on how they perceive God – as their personal deity who will protect and empower them in the world – rather than what God has always promised – to be with the people and make them a light to all nations. This is their blessing. Through Jeremiah, God is asking them to lay down their soul, their being, their life, and their identity as they see it, and pick up the life that God intends for them. What does it profit the ancient nation of Judah to gain the world, to be like the nations, and lose who they truly are, their soul and calling as a light to all nations? They want to hear that everything will be great for them, and they reject Jeremiah because his prophecy highlights the consequences of their sin.

As human beings, it is our default to see things as we want them to be. And what we want things to be, is not necessarily as they truly are. Sadly, a survey of American protestants released last month by Lifeway, indicates that more than half of the people surveyed, say that their church teaches that giving more to the church, and give more to charities, God will return more to them. It’s called the prosperity gospel and it’s a misguided notion of what a blessing is. A blessing is something that brings us closer to God, and not the material things we want in this world. Yet, 76 percent of those surveyed – and I say of those surveyed because I really hope it is not truly 76 percent of Protestant Christians in this country – said they believe that God, desires for them to prosper financially, to be wealthy. This is what we want to believe, but not what God actually promises.

In our gospel today, Jesus tells the disciples that he will suffer and die, and that this will come at the hands of the religious leaders of his day. But promises that he will rise again on the third day. It seems Peter, perhaps again speaking for the group, is not listening, and he seems to wonder if Jesus remembers his confession. After all, the Messiah is a King, a ruler, and if the Messiah is Son of the Living God, surely, suffering and death, is not the plan. It will be victory and lasting peace. Like Jeremiah, he acts like the world. He acts like his enemies, seeking victory and conquer.

But in the path of suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus offers solidarity, not victory. Yes, he will defeat the powers of sin and death, but not by human conquest – by submission and obedience. The Son of the Living God, fully one with God, entered into our humanity, not to live what is considered the ideal life – wealth, power, popularity – but to live in solidarity with us, as Paul writes and we will say in our affirmation of faith, even to the point of death, yes, death on a cross – despised and rejected on the ultimate instrument of Roman shame. Peter wants for Jesus, his God, that ideal life, but Jesus came to be God in solidarity with us to endure all that sin and death can do.

In most translations, we find Peter saying, “God forbid it” or “Be it far from you, Lord,” before saying that what Jesus has predicted will never happen. These make the point and are good translations. But I think it’s interesting that the word here is *“hileos,”* and it is one that is little used in Greek, except in translating Hebrew, and it corresponds with the Hebrew word, *“kapher,”* for “covering” sin. It’s about being made right with God, so basically, Peter says to Jesus, “You don’t deserve punishment. You’re already right with God.” Or, as we heard today, “You are covered, Lord.”

Then we heard the word, “Satan,” in Jesus’s response. Peter is thinking as the world thinks, and not of what God is accomplishing. We often read this with an exclamation point, a declarative – Get behind me! We do this as if the word Satan means we have to make it an exorcism on Peter. But the same word, a preposition translated “Get behind,” is used in the next sentence, which both our reading today and the King James Version, translate as “come after me” or in others, “follow me.”

Now, I don't doubt Matthew intends to shock with the word, Satan, but what if, rather than reading this like it's an exorcism, we read it literally, and with love. What if what Jesus says calmly here is, "Follow me adversary. For you are not thinking straight. You are not thinking of God's ways, but thinking only of what human beings think." Then the teachings that follow would not seem so squeezed in afterward.

"Follow me adversary. For you are not thinking straight. You are not thinking of God's ways, but thinking only of what human beings think. If anyone desires to follow me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and come with me. For whoever might desire to save their soul will lose it. But whoever might lose their soul will find it on account of me. For what will it profit a person, if they gain the whole world, but lose their soul? What will a person give as an exchange for their soul?"

Here again, you will see the translation differs from what we usually see. But the word "*psyche*" in Greek can be translated as life, or soul, or being. Basically, it's a word that means our identity as humans. Often, life is used for the "whoever might desire to save their life will lose it," and then at the end, gaining the world is pitted against losing your soul. But it is the same word used throughout. Why are we not consistent? So in today's translation, it was soul, all the way through. It could have said identity. If we wish to follow Jesus, whoever might lose the identity they have for themselves, will find it, on Jesus's account – you will find your true self in Christ.

Friends, these readings today are not about telling you to shape up, or God will reject you, because what can you give in exchange for your soul? These are about finding your true self in laying down that exchange idea, and picking up the identity you truly have of someone who is loved by God. What's more, you are not loved by just any God, but the God who loves us so much, the Son – fully God, equal to God – shared in our life, coming to us in our flesh, within our limits and our struggles, to be in solidarity with our whole identity to lift us up, by dying for us and then rising again for us and ascending to heaven to send the Spirit to us. He shared in our identity, so we might share his, receiving the inheritance due to him, a life that is eternal and abundant.

This life is not a reward for our accomplishments, but the means to empower us, not to conquer, but to know it is already conquered. This means we can love without fear, without limit, without concern for what we think we deserve as Jeremiah did, without concern for our vision of how God should act as Peter had done, nor concern for human accomplishment as the Romans believed, and without concern for God's dignity, since this is God's chosen way to do things.

Beloved, in all your struggles, I want you to know you are God's beloved. We will have an anointing soon to emphasize this – You are God's beloved, and known by the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and your God shared in your life, enduring pain and even death for you in the Son, and the Spirit is with us now, in and among us, as the people of God. Whatever, you are going through, you are not alone in what you are going through – God is with you. You are loved and called to love by this good news.

A second flashback to the Corinthians passage in January, and the sermon in which I talked about a book by a Roman Catholic priest called, "Tatoos on the Heart." This week, I read his second book, "Barking to the Choir," and I recommend both highly. In there, there is a story of a former gang member who asked if the priest would help him buy a refrigerator.

The former gang member he calls “Chuy,” says that he had been “disguised” as a drug dealer. On completing his 18-month training with Homeboy Industries, he went before the trainees still in the program and told them, “You are diamonds covered in dust,” choking up with tears, as he speaks. “You...can wipe your dust off here.” Boyle writes that a colleague said of Chuy, that he “learned to become loyal to his own life.”

This guy who wore the disguise of gang member and did what he wanted when he wanted, when he wanted thinking he was free, now discovered true liberation and discovered his truest self. Like God told Jeremiah, he found the value in what others might call worthless. Boyle writes that afterward, he met with Chuy at the department store and saw that Chuy had already befriended the salesperson. Boyle is touched by this vision of a former gang member and store clerk as friends.

Afterward, he gives Chuy a ride home. When they pull up to his apartment, Chuy says that lately, he’s “been having one-on-ones with, you know, God. I don’t understand it,” he say, as he turns to look at Boyle. “The Dude Shows up. I mean...why would he do that after all the...bad I’ve done, why would he show up?”

Friends, God sent Jeremiah so that the people of Judah would turn to God like Chuy did. God asked Jeremiah to do the same. The Father sent the Son so we would turn to him, and follow him, and when Peter didn’t, Jesus pulled him back in the fold. Never forget that you are not alone – in every aspect of your life – the good, the bad, the suffering and joy – the God who loves you unconditionally is always with you.

Yes, we have worldly expectations and it’s hard in our everyday lives to not wish God would vindicate us always. We don’t always have victory, but we do always have solidarity. We can take our disguises off and pick up our lives, not on our account, but on Jesus’s account. All we need to do is turn around and accept that “the Dude Shows Up.” Amen.

#### Matthew 16:21-28 Original Translation

“From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that it is necessary for him to go away to Jerusalem, and to suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and to be killed, and on the third day, to be raised.

And having taken Jesus aside, Peter began to admonish him, saying, "You are covered, Lord. This will never ever be done to you!"

But having turned, Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. For your thoughts are not of God's thoughts, but the thoughts of human beings."

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone desires to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and come with me. For whoever might desire to save their soul will lose it. But whoever might lose their soul on account of me will find it. For what will it profit a person, if they gain the whole world, but lose their soul? What will a person give as an exchange for their soul?"

“For the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his Father, with his angels, and then he will give to each according to their practices. Truly, I say to you that some of those who are standing here shall not taste death until they will have seen the Son of Man coming into his Kingdom.”