

October 5, 2003
Pentecost 17

"The Loving Hands of Ebed-Melech"

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, ² "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.'³ 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.'" ⁴ 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." ⁵ "He is in your hands," King Zedekiah answered. "The king can do nothing to oppose you." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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, ⁸ Ebed-Melech went out of the palace and said to him, ⁹ "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." ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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, ¹³ and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.

In the Lord's Prayer we pray the words "Deliver us from evil." With that prayer we are asking the Lord to deliver us from some of the troubles or burdens that come into our lives. Your burdens at work, burdens with visits to the doctor, burdens that pop up in getting along with people can weigh you down, buckle your knees and crush you.

The Lord may surprise you in the way he answers this powerful prayer, "deliver us from evil." He can return in glory and take you to the place he has prepared for you. Then you will not have to worry about the hassles on your job, or the visit to the doctor, or other kids getting on your nerves in school. He can deliver you by removing some of the burden for you. For example he can bring healing to the pain in your body, or remove hassles in your life by providing you with a new job. He may also deliver you by giving you strength to meet the challenges that face you.

The Lord may also provide you with a friend who can encourage you or help you, or someone who becomes your life long companion and soul mate. This morning we see

a man with dark skin, a man from Ethiopia, the land of Cush, reaching down to help the prophet Jeremiah by lifting him out of dark, dank, dirty cistern.

No pit is so deep that Jesus is not deeper. In the darkest hole of your life the risen Lord and Savior can micro manage his church with such precision and detail that he finds the ideal person to help you through a time of crisis and pain. This morning want to take a closer look at the dark hands lowering a rope down into the cistern, those beautiful dark **loving hands of Ebed-Melech**, a man the Lord raised up to help his prophet Jeremiah.

1) Hate filled hands threw Jeremiah into the cistern

It was hate filled hands that lowered Jeremiah into that muddy, foul smelling cistern. We know who those four guys were: Shephatiah, Gedaliah, Passhur, and Jehucal. They hated Jeremiah because he was telling the people of Jerusalem to give up and hand themselves over to the Babylonians. These fanatical leaders were worried that Jeremiah would discourage the few soldiers that were left and keep them from fighting down to the last man. In their fanatical zeal they even told the king, "This man is not seeking the good of these people, but their ruin."

The King of Babylon had already captured Jerusalem once, and hauled a large number of people into captivity. The Babylonians occupied Jerusalem. Their soldiers were camped outside the city walls. Why would these guys ever even imagine they could stand up against such a powerful army that occupied their land? Because Egypt was on the march, and the Babylonians had to wage war against them. The Jewish fanatics thought this was the perfect time to join Egypt and fight against Babylon. In the previous chapter Jeremiah warned them, "Even if you were to defeat the entire Babylonian army that is attacking you and only wounded men were left in their tents, they would come out and burn this city down." The Egyptians failed in their attempt to overcome the Babylonians. You know who received the full wrath of the Babylonians- Jerusalem and the fanatics that were hopelessly trying to defend the city.

These fanatics went to King Zedekiah and asked for his permission to kill Jeremiah. Instead of taking a stand against these fanatics, he handed over Jeremiah to them because he was weak kneed, yellow bellied, a coward. Instead of killing Jeremiah and shedding his blood on the streets of the city, they decided instead to lower him with ropes into a cistern that had no water in it, only mud. Our text says, "And Jeremiah sank down in the mud."

Knowing what we know about Jeremiah I am sure that he wished they had taken his life. He was tired of proclaiming messages from the Lord, and telling people to repent, and warning them of the destruction to come. What an inglorious and ignominious chapter in his life, sinking down in the mud, no place to sleep, shivering in the dampness and cold, drinking putrid water, brushing off the bugs. No wonder the prophet burst forth in anger in Lamentations, "He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape."

There may be days in your life when you feel like someone has lowered you down into a dark, dank, dirty cistern. You cannot avoid some trouble in life. The Lord will not put a bubble around you. You are part of a dying world because of Adam's fall into sin. Cars will

hit your car. Germs will come into your mouth. Your body will deteriorate as you get older. Obnoxious kids in school will make your life miserable just as they do to kids who are not Christian. The wars that claim the lives of young men and women could claim your child. Job was right when he said, "Man is born to trouble like the sparks that fly upward." Or as the title of the book by the humorist Erma Brombeck said, "If life is a bowl of cherries what am I doing in the pits."

What we may forget and fail to fully grasp is the extra burden and extra trouble that is placed on us because we are Christians who love the name of Jesus and want to promote the glory of his kingdom. Just as Jeremiah had a message about the destruction of Jerusalem, we have been given a message that involves warning people about the end of the world and the final judgment. Hebrews 9:27 must be shared with more people, "And it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this comes the judgment." If you are bold in your faith, and let people know they can only find salvation in the name of Christ, get ready to take the heat, and even be thrown into a pit or cistern like Jeremiah. Some of the worst persecution and anger may come from the members of your own family.

2) The loving hands of Ebed-Melech rescued Jeremiah

As long as this world stands Jesus will be on his throne. He will be the head of his body the church. His marching orders to make disciples of all nations was preceded with the words, "All power is given unto me..." Jesus can bring people into your life to support you and sustain you when you find yourself down in the pit. So it was with Jeremiah.

Our text tells us that Ebed-Melech, a man from Ethiopia or the land of Cush, a man with dark skin, went to the king and asked for permission to rescue Jeremiah. The original Hebrew tells us that he was a eunuch. His name was Ebed-Melech, a Hebrew name that means "the servant of the King." Not only was he serving Zedekiah, king of Judah, he was a true servant of the King of kings and Lord of lords, who believed the words of the Lord that were coming from the mouth of Jeremiah. Where are God's people the Jews? Why does a foreigner, an Ethiopian, a black man, a eunuch have to step up to do the job? When you are in the pit, be prepared to be surprised at the people the Lord may send into your life to help you.

Ebed-Melech goes to the king while he sits by the Benjamin Gate. Kings did that to be close to their people, to hear their requests. Ebed-Melech boldly goes before the king and requests permission to rescue Jeremiah. The king gives him permission and tells him to take 30 men with him. Two good men could have pulled him up with ropes. 30 men are needed because the situation is so dangerous.

What a touching scene of love and compassion. Ebed-Melech takes some old clothes and rags from a storeroom and lowers them down with a rope to help Jeremiah out of the deep cistern into which he had been thrown. He tells the weary and worn prophet to take the rags and put them under his arms and then put the rope around his body. They carefully pull him out of the cistern, covered with mud, and put him in the courtyard of the guard.

In Psalm 121 we sing, "I lift up my eyes to the mountains, from where does my help come from, My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." There will be times

in your life when you find yourself reading this psalm over and over again. "My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." Don't be surprised if the Lord does not deliver you by sending someone into your life who will bring a word of encouragement or an act of kindness to you that lifts you from the pit and eases your burden. Remember that time when Elijah had no food to eat. It was not a family in Israel that took him into their home, but a widow from Zarepeth, a heathen land, who made the pancakes from the flour and oil that never ran low.

Several years ago I saw something in a nursing home that I have never forgotten. When Norm Larson and I led a Bible devotion and hymn sing, there was an elderly man and his wife, both in their upper 90's. They held hands together as we sang, shared the Word of God, and prayed. Not two hands but four hands were held together. Shortly after that both died. The Lord provides you with people to give you strength and support. It may be your life long mate whom the Lord uses to help you through the hard times, or it may be a life long friend, or it may be someone who just passes through your life, and sets you on a new course.

When we see the hands of Ebed-Melech reaching down to help Jeremiah out of the pit, don't you think of other loving hands that have helped you in the past? A mother who held you in your arms. A friend who was there for you. Of all the hands that have reached out to us, no hands compares to the loving hands of Jesus. He kept the nail prints in his hands to remind us every day of his love for us, and to help us recall the blessings we have in him. Psalm 103 says, "He has redeemed my life from the pit and crowned me with love and compassion." That pit referred to in this psalm is not some cistern or hole in the ground but the pit of hell itself. That's where I was and you were when we were born into this world. That's the pit we deserve even to this day for the way we have acted and lived our lives this past week.

Jesus lifted us out of the pit, not by lowering a rope down to us, but taking the punishment for us. So successful was he at rescuing us, that we can be sure of where we are going when we die, and sure that he will send people into our lives to deliver us from evil, just as he did with our friend Jeremiah. We close our series of sermons on Jeremiah these well known words of the prophet recorded for us in Lamentations: "Your mercies are new to us every morning, great is his faithfulness." Amen.