

September 23, 2012
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.

I am holding in my hands some old rags that can be used for painting, wiping up spills, cleaning and changing oil in the car. A man named Ebed-Melech used some old rags to lift Jeremiah out of the cistern. He lowered these rags down to him with a rope. Ebed-Melech told Jeremiah to put the rope around his body and place the rags under his arms so he could pull him up out of the muddy cistern without hurting him.

There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper. That was certainly true in the life of Jeremiah. At his most difficult times in life the Lord was there to rescue him. The Lord had given Jeremiah this promise "I will be with you and rescue you." This is also true in your life. There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper. In Isaiah 43 we hear the Lord say to us, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." The Lord can send people to help you during hard times just as he sent Ebed-Melech to rescue Jeremiah from the muddy cistern.

This morning we want to take a closer look at the loving hands of Ebed-Melech that lowered the rope down to help Jeremiah. The hands were beautiful hands, dark skinned hands, the hands of a man from Ethiopia. When you wait on the Lord, be prepared to be surprised at who he will send in your life to help you.

Hate filled hands threw Jeremiah into the cistern

It was hate-filled hands that threw Jeremiah down into the cistern to die a slow agonizing death by starvation. We even knew the names of the guys who did this. They were Shephatiah, Gedaliah, Juncal and Passhur. They hated Jeremiah because of the message he was delivering from the Lord: "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 and live." The Lord spoke to his people through Jeremiah and told them to surrender to the Babylonians who were surrounding the city. The Lord wanted the sufferings of people to come to an end and lives to be spared. These four fellows go to the king and demand that Jeremiah be put to death because in their words, "he was not seeking the good these people but their ruin."

How could the Jewish people ever think they could stand up against the powerful Babylonian army? Instead of putting their trust in the Lord these people put their trust in the chariots and horses of Egypt. The Babylonians defeated the Egyptians. Then they turned their attention to Jerusalem. In chapter 37 we hear Jeremiah warn the people of Jerusalem, "This is what the Lord says, 'Pharaoh's army which has marched out to support you, will go back to its own land, to Egypt. Then the Babylonians will return and attack this city; they will capture it and burn it down.'" Jeremiah will not keep his mouth shut and it gets him into trouble, deep trouble. Last week we heard him say that he tried to keep the message inside of himself and not say anything it became a fire in his bones.

The princes of offices of Jerusalem go to King Zedekiah with permission to have Jeremiah put to death. The king does nothing to protect this prophet of the Lord. He hands Jeremiah over to these men with the words, "The king can do nothing to oppose you." Instead of putting Jeremiah to death they lower him by ropes into an underground cistern in the courtyard that had no water in it. It must have been a deep cistern. When his feet hit the bottom he sank down into the mud. They did not kill him, but they did put him down into the cistern to die a slow death from exposure and starvation. With the cistern covered the voice of Jeremiah was finally silenced.

What will happen to you if you follow in the footsteps of Jeremiah and try to be faithful to Jesus in these last days? In our gospel for today Jesus said, "If any one would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." It is hard to deny yourself. It is so much easier to go along with your feelings, listen to what Satan suggests or go along with the world and what it tells you to do. The Apostle Paul speaks of the struggle to be faithful with these words, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do this I keep on doing."

What I remember most about the Christian classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, is the terrible time dear Christian had when struggling through the Slough of Despond. He had lost touch with the Word of God and found himself sinking down during this low time in his life. Because you want to be faithful to Jesus you suffer inside when you don't live up to what he expects of you. That is the cross you bear out of love for Jesus. That is a very real Slough of Despond that faces you.

You may not be thrown down into a muddy cistern for speaking the truth about Jesus, but you may have mud thrown at you. There is a program on the Discovery Channel called "Dirty Jobs." The host searches out some of the dirtiest jobs in the country and then volunteers to help with some of the work. One of the dirtiest jobs in the world is being a Christian and yet it is the more glorious job in the world because we carry in our bodies the dying of our Lord Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead. We have the job of proclaiming to people in our community the truth of God's Word. People don't want to hear some of these parts of God's Word about judgment day, and sin, and the need to repent and believe in Jesus to have sin washed away. We hear them say to us: "Leave me alone. Get out of my life. Stop bugging me. Keep your mouth shut." The time may be coming sooner than we think that we will be put into a muddy cistern for daring to claim Jesus is the only way for people to be saved.

In that dark, dank, depressing cistern Jeremiah could barely see the light of day. That was his reward for faithfully bringing the message of God's Word to people. Once again we remind ourselves "There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper." Loving hands will remove the cover from the cistern. Loving hands will lower down a rope with rags. Loving hands will gently raise Jeremiah from muddy cistern bottom.

The loving hands of Ebed-Melech rescue Jeremiah

"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 that 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.'"

You never knew whom the Lord will send in your life to help you when you are down in the pit. Ebed-Melech comes from the land of Cush or Ethiopia. His skin is dark. He is the servant of the king. More important he serves the King of kings and Lord of lords. God's people have turned their back on the Lord, but this man from Africa is faithful to the Lord. He has come to know of the God of Abraham who has promised a Savior to bless all nations including the people of Ethiopia. It is amazing how the name of the Lord that radiated from the temple of the Lord reached into other nations. When the great temple built was dedicated Solomon prayed that it might be a place where all nations come to know the true God.

Keep your eyes open because the Lord has already planned dear Christians to come into your life who will be a blessing to you, even from unlikely places. It was a hot day in Tucson. I was trying to get some work down on a sermon. It had been a demanding week with lots of counseling with people who had problems. I was exhausted and tired. The phone rang.

A voice on the other end said, "I am sorry I have the wrong number...oh, are you the pastor of a church." I told him I was the pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Tucson. He proceeded to tell how he had come to read the Bible and became a Christian. He shared with me what he had been reading and I shared with him. After almost twenty minutes we said good-bye. I hung up the phone amazingly refreshed and restored. You never know when the Lord will send someone to you to strengthen you and help you. The Lord can send angels to protect you. He may also provide you with the Ebed-Melech you need to rescue you.

What a touching scene of love and compassion. Ebed-Melech takes some old clothes and rags and a rope. He takes thirty men with him for protection. He lowers the rags and rope down to Jeremiah with the instructions, "Put these old rags and worn out clothes under your arms and pad the ropes." Then it says, "They pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern." In Psalm 121 we say, "My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." The Lord may use certain, special people to help you and encourage you along the path of life. I could write a book about all the times I have visited people with God's Word and they were the ones who encouraged me and helped me as they affirmed what I was reading to them or adding their own thoughts about God's grace and mercy to them.

As you stand beside Jeremiah the prophet and look up at the light coming through the cistern and you see the dark skinned hands of Ebed-Melech, I would have you think of other hands that have reached down to rescue you. Think of the hands of Jesus reaching out to be nailed to the cross to rescue you from the eternal death and destruction we deserve because of our sin. Roman soldiers do not have to grab his hands to nail them to the cross because Jesus offered himself up for our sin? Our Old Testament lesson says that Jesus offered his back to those who beat him. Here I was down in the pit of sin and eternal death. "What wondrous love is this O my soul...When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down, Christ laid aside his crown for my soul." Unlike Ebed-Melech who pulled Jeremiah from the pit, Jesus came down into the pit and took the punishment we deserve. The words of Psalm 103 are so true: "He has redeemed me from the pit and crowned me with love and compassion."

We close our series of sermons on Jeremiah with these words of Jeremiah from Lamentations: "Your mercies are new to us every morning, great is your faithfulness."