

Proper 17 Year A

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At some point during my time as a student at Belmont Abbey, I remember being told a apocryphal story about St. Teresa of Avila -- a sixteenth Spanish Carmelite nun, poet, and theologian later declared a Doctor of the Church. The story goes that once while she was travelling her carriage became stuck in the mud, at which point she cried out to God to stop putting so many obstacles in her path. God replied -- "do not complain my daughter, for this is how I treat all of my friends" Teresa snapped back, "if this is how you treat your friends Lord -- it is no wonder that you have so few!"

Today's Scripture readings ask us to reflect on what it means to discern and follow God's call -- especially when following that call is fraught with difficulty and even personal suffering.

The Prophet Jeremiah expresses this well in our first reading, lamenting bitterly to God: *know that on your account I suffer insult. Under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. 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.* Jeremiah preached a deeply unpatriotic message of impending national disaster and nonresistance in Judah, just prior to its conquest by Babylon in 587 BC. Jeremiah believed that God was using Babylon to judge Judah for the sins of social injustice and idolatry. Unsurprisingly, Jeremiah was ridiculed and mocked and pushed into isolation. After years of following God's call, of investing all of his time and his energy in delivering God's message to God's people, he feels now that God has abandoned him. Although God claims to be "living water" for God's people, Jeremiah calls God a "deceitful brook" and "waters that fail". Make no mistake, the prophet Jeremiah calls God a liar. And he is angry. And he demands that God answer. Although Jeremiah expected to find refreshment and life in following his call, it now seems all to have been a waste -- instead of water, he finds a mirage in the wilderness.

Perhaps you and I sometimes feel this way too. Despite our best efforts, we can't seem to push back the darkness in our own lives, let alone in the world. It is no secret, of course, that we are living in unprecedented times -- our nation is wracked with pain during a pandemic that has claimed the lives of over 180,000 Americans. Police brutality and systemic racism continue to claim black life after black life. The highest levels of leadership in our government abscond responsibility and pander a message of fear and hate. Like Jeremiah, we are angered by God's silence. We have followed God's call. We have fulfilled our side of the bargain. In the midst of so much suffering, we expect God to act.

So, too, did Jesus' disciples when he walked with them in Galilee. In our reading from Matthew, Jesus rebukes Peter for failing to grasp the significance of his life and ministry, just after having

confessed Jesus to be the messiah. Peter, like many expectant first century Jews, awaited a political leader who would drive out Roman rule and restore Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. This messiah would be a warrior-king, leading Israel to victory over the Gentile nations. So when Jesus tells Peter that his messiahship involves his suffering and death in Jerusalem, Peter is appalled. "God forbid it Lord, this should never happen to you!" Peter must wonder, 'what then have I been following you all this time for? What about this Kingdom that Jesus has spent so much time talking about?'

And so Jesus rebukes Peter harshly -- *get behind me Satan*. Perhaps in Peter's words Jesus hears the echo of another voice from the past, "All these kingdoms I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." By calling Peter *Satan*, Jesus again recognizes and renounces that voice -- and the temptation to seek power and glory. Peter *the rock* has become a stumbling block along the path of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. And so Jesus orders Peter to get behind him, using this teaching moment to remind Peter that the disciple is to follow and not to lead. And Jesus will soon teach Peter what power in the Kingdom really looks like. This power will soon be manifested on a hill outside of Jerusalem, in the broken body of an executed criminal hanging on an imperial cross.

This message is crucial for Christians to remember today, when our political leaders seek to foment fear and division. When we too are tempted by that ancient adversary to seek power and privilege -- or to act out fear, self-preservation, and scarcity. *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.* To follow Jesus is to carry the cross, and in order to carry that cross we must first unburden ourselves -- for Christians, this means renouncing pretensions to power and privilege. It means renouncing triumphalism, self-aggrandizement, and self-interest.

Today, more than ever, we are called to remind the world that there is another way. Following the way of the cross, we see differently. And we testify that God's kingdom is breaking into the world -- that through the resurrection, Jesus has defeated death and shown us the way to life.

*Paul says: 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. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed*

*them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

This is what it means to walk in the way of Jesus, and to walk in the way of the cross. To live as though the Kingdom of God were among us. And if we bear our cross, we never bear it alone, for Jesus also says that his yolk is easy and his burden is light.

Now, I do not believe that God puts obstacles in our path. Not only does that seem cruel, I know that creating problems for myself is the one job I can do well enough without any of God’s help. But like Jeremiah, I too become disappointed and discouraged when God seems silent. And like Peter, I am often limited by my own vision of what I think God should do.

But in our Gospel, Jesus simply asks us to do one thing: to follow, and to let him lead. And to trust that wherever we go and whatever adversity we face, God is with us along the way -- stumbling alongside us under the weight of our crosses.