

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A, 8.30.20

Jeremiah 20:15, 7-9/Romans 12:1-2/

Matthew 16:21-27

FROM STUMBLING BLOCK TO STEPPING STONE

Jeremiah the prophet is sometimes called a “man of sorrows,” or referred to as the “weeping prophet.” The poor guy got stuck with a terrible job. He was to warn his fellow Israelites about Jerusalem’s coming destruction. The people were turning to false gods and deviated so far from God’s laws that they had broken the covenant, causing God to withdraw his blessings. Jeremiah never wanted the job. You may recall his story. He was called by God at a very early age. *Before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you.* Jeremiah resisted: *Hold it, Master God. Look at me. I don’t know anything. I’m only a boy.* But God wouldn’t listen to his excuses. *Don’t say: I’m only a boy. I’ll tell you where to go... I’ll tell you what to say... I’ll be right there, looking after you.*



Years later, after ridicule and resistance, after opposition to his message and conspiracy against him, Jeremiah was losing hope. He tried to keep the people and their kings faithful to God amidst an atmosphere of political intrigue and backstabbing, not unlike that which prevails

in our own nation today. Jeremiah was blunt about what was right and what was not, and he suffered at the hands of the powerful because of his outspokenness. He was doing what God called him to do, but Jeremiah forgot God’s promise and began to doubt that God listened and cared. So in our passage today we eavesdrop on the prophet’s fight with God: *You pushed me into this, God, and I let you do it.* We can’t help but feel sorry for the guy. But we can also relate to him -- when we’re feeling weary, when we’ve had it with the kids, when life gets tedious and nerves are frayed, when our best efforts don’t seem good enough, when we want to shake our fist at God and demand answers. We’ve got a friend in Jeremiah, the complainer who wasn’t afraid to wrestle with God.



In light of Jeremiah’s tale of woe, I couldn’t help but think of a modern-day prophet and the resistance he’s been experiencing on every front. Dr. Anthony Fauci is one of the world’s leading experts on infectious diseases, and during the early stages of the Covid pandemic became a household name -- recognized as one of the most trusted medical figures in the U. S. and world-wide. Dr. Fauci has served American public health in various capacities for over 50 years, and has been an advisor to every U.S. president since Ronald Reagan. I’d like to think that his Italian-

Catholic upbringing, as well as his Jesuit educational training at Regis High School in Manhattan and Holy Cross College in Massachusetts, contributed to his vocation of dedicated life-long public service. It was his unfortunate but critical task at the beginning of this pandemic, along with Dr. Birx and other members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, to issue the stern warning and wake-up call.

Like Jeremiah, Dr. Fauci played an unenviable role with implications that impacted every aspect of our common life – social, economic, educational, liturgical, familial and personal. Yet, he stayed with the task in spite of opposition. The only way to get ahead of the virus until a vaccine is discovered is masking, hand-washing and distancing. And we watched what happened through graphs and numbers when the prophet's warnings went unheeded and our country's number of cases and number of deaths from the virus escalated and surpassed most countries in the world. The national government took active steps to undermine and freeze out Dr. Fauci, including limiting his media appearances, undercutting confidence in his work, refuting his advice and undermining his credibility. As one headline declared: *The White House has pushed Fauci into a Little Box on the Side*. It was like the fate of the prophet Jeremiah in Chapter 38:6 - *They took Jeremiah and lowered him with ropes into a cistern where he sank into the mud*.



That job of a prophet with its accompanying challenges and inherent pain isn't limited to biblical figures and nationally-known persons. I've seen it in action time and time again in the lives and experiences of people of all ages in our parish. I've seen it in the loving care that one of our parishioners gave to her husband of fifty years, as she cared for him day and night for the last several years of his life. Bedridden and unable to speak or respond to the love she lavished upon him, she fed him and washed him and spoke to him with compassion and humor – always with a smile on her face. This wasn't a burden, but a labor of love. If it was frustrating or tedious, no one would have ever known. Maybe in her private prayer she echoed Jeremiah's complaint: *You duped me, Lord, and I let myself be duped*.



No one could blame her if that was her prayer. But you couldn't prove it by me. All I ever observed was someone who picked up her cross and carried it with love and devotion.

I've heard the courage of the prophet in the voices of some young couples who recently lost a child prematurely or through miscarriage. Confused, disappointed and in pain, they tried to make sense of what happened to them. Yet, even with their dream of new life dashed, they struggled to maintain their faith in God, to entrust that life into God's

loving arms and not lose hope for their future. Maybe in their private prayer they echoed Jeremiah: *I'm telling you, I will not mention God; I won't speak his name anymore.* But in their prayer request of me, they opened their hearts to receive consolation and comfort, and reassurance that God is still with them.

I saw the courage of the prophet a few weeks ago in the faces of three young sixth grade parish boys – Brady, Grant and Jimmy -- as we stood in the evening twilight at a corner in Burton Valley before a makeshift neighborhood shrine for their pal Leo who lost his life this summer in a biking accident.



They were reading the messages on posters and notes, including the ones they wrote, left with candles and flowers and teddy bears, in memory of their buddy and friend, recognizing, even in their young lives and in their broken hearts, how precious is life and how wonderful the gift of friendship – a gift we should never take for granted. My prayer for them is that one day they'll be able to echo Jeremiah's conviction: *God's love and peace is a like a fire burning in my heart... I can hardly keep it in.*

The crosses that we bear in life are usually not so dramatic. Most of the time we'd be embarrassed to tell others about the things we think are "problems" in our lives – a missed appointment, a real estate deal that fell through, a drop in stock investments, a few weeks of physical

therapy, a swim meet your child lost, a subtle insult that someone threw at you, a bad day on the golf course... But these are still our crosses, no matter how insignificant they may seem to someone else. And they can turn us sour for an hour or a day. They can make us irritable to our family and friends. They can depress our spirits and distract our attention.



Peter's complaint to Jesus in the gospel becomes our own: *These things should never happen to us.* Or we can choose to bear those daily crosses in the spirit of Jesus and following his example. Then they move from being stumbling blocks on our journey to becoming stepping stones that lead to a life of grace... a spirit of compassion and understanding for others who suffer... a deeper union with Our Lord whose death on his cross is the means of our salvation. See in your own cross an invitation to grace and let yourself hear Christ's call to pick up that cross and follow.

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