

Pentecost 3 + June 25, 2017
Jeremiah 20:7-13

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Two fine, upstanding, peaceable young men. One an adventurous, diligent college student with a bright future. The other a nutrition services supervisor at a Montessori school who loved kids. Both now dead because of injustices that were supported by the prevailing system for infractions that were either minor or nonexistent.

Both these young men have been in the news a lot recently. Otto Warmbier was arrested by the North Korean military for allegedly taking a political poster from a staff-only area of his hotel in Pyongyang. Philando Castile was stopped in St. Paul, Minnesota, because of a broken taillight. Otto Warmbier died from a severe brain injury suffered while he was in captivity. Philando Castile died at the scene, shot multiple times as he was reaching for his driver's license as requested.

You all have doubtless experienced some form of injustice, although your lives may not have been hanging in the balance. Perhaps it was for something you didn't do, such as refusing to go along with something you knew was wrong. Perhaps it was for something you did do, like speaking unwelcome words of truth as the prophet Jeremiah did in the chapters that lead up to our first reading today. In the aftermath, where was God for you in the midst of whatever persecution you experienced? Where was God in the quick chain of events that led to the killing of Philando Castile? Where was God for Otto Warmbier while he imprisoned by an evil regime for a minor bit of mischief, if he committed that at all?

This predicament is where Jeremiah finds himself in our reading today. For 18 chapters he has been telling it like it is to the people of the kingdom of Judah, as God instructed him to do. They have abandoned the Lord and fallen into idolatry. They have been worshiping other gods and doing terrible things to innocent people. On top of that, God tells Jeremiah to say, soon they will be attacked and overcome by enemies. Everything in the Judah will be plundered and destroyed. The people will be taken captive and deported to a distant land, where they will all die.

Things did come about just as Jeremiah said. The Babylonians invade, the temple in Jerusalem is destroyed and the people are hauled off to Babylon and held for generations against their will. In fact, this is the defining event of the Hebrew Scriptures. The destruction of the temple and the long Babylonian captivity inspired an outpouring of other prophetic writings lamenting the crisis and proclaiming God's vision for the restoration of Israel.

But you can just imagine the people's wrath as Jeremiah was fiercely accusing them of idolatry in many forms. In today's reading, he is dealing with the consequences of the massive word of judgment he has just spoken. For him this has been costly speech, and he is struggling with God what he has done. As the psalmist sings in Psalm 69 today, "Zeal for your house has eaten me up, and the scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me."

"You enticed me, and I was enticed," he complains miserably to God. It seems to him that God seduced, or harassed, him into saying all these things, and now Jeremiah is suffering for it. Because of all this, he tells God, he has become a laughingstock. He demands to know: Was God being trustworthy in telling him to speak in this way? Because of all the derision that is being heaped on his head, it feels as if God is not supporting him. On the other hand, Jeremiah then reasons, if had

remained silent he would have been in agony, because he knows he is compelled to speak the truth. He would burn from within if he didn't.

Making Jeremiah's plight worse, people have begun whispering to each other and saying that it is *he* who is causing all the trouble. Actually, isn't this sometimes what happens when we are bold enough to speak out against something that we believe is wrong? Instead of receiving our words, those in question often hurl it right back at us and accuse us of the same thing.

The turning point comes in verse 11 when, in spite of everything, Jeremiah acknowledges God's faithfulness. "You are with me like a dread warrior," he confesses with a cry. "Therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail!"

This is the conviction that we draw on in the midst of injustices we experience. God is always faithful. In God there is always hope. Will what happened to Otto Warmbier help crack open the inner workings of the North Korean government, bring justice to those who are suffering in that country, and possibly even bring peace to the world? Will the case of Philando Castile help improve the system so something like that might not ever happen again?

In our Gospel reading today Jesus says, "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Often when we speak the truth we do suffer injury, like Jeremiah did as he faced the people's wrath. But in doing what God is calling us to do, we find life, true life, as we cast off the old self that used to stay quiet when injustices were perpetrated. "Those who find their life will lose it," Jesus tells the disciples, "and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

This certain knowledge that God will never forsake us is what brings new life and new hope even into the darkest times of adversity. A friend of mine who was for many years the beloved registrar at my seminary, and like a mother to countless students, experienced the tragic loss of her son-in-law Eric a few days ago while the family was vacationing in Florida. There was no history, no warning, no hint that Eric was about to suffer a massive heart attack while jogging on the beach. But I know my friend: After the initial shock and intense period of grieving lessens, she will be even more of a source of compassion and love for others, through the crucified Christ, than she already is.

There are always going to be times when we feel that things aren't fair. We may even take it out on God like Jeremiah did at first, and hurl at God the many "whys" that it is in our human nature to ask: Why me? Why him? Why her? Why now? Why at all?

The people of Judah gave up on God and fell into sinful ways. But like Jeremiah, our confidence in God's unchanging presence guides us through all of life's challenges and sorrows. And there we find our life.

Amen.