

“When the Going Gets Tough”

Matthew 10:31, Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7-A)

June 25, 2017

It's possible that **Jeremiah was only 16 or 17 years old** when the LORD God first called upon him to become a prophet. Of that day, Jeremiah says to us through his own lips: **“The Word of the LORD came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you! Before you were born I consecrated you! I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations’” (Jeremiah 1:4-5)!**

And what was **Jeremiah's response** to God's call? Jeremiah **protested** by saying: **“Ah, LORD God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!”**

But the LORD said to Jeremiah: **“Do not say, I am only a boy; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD” (Jeremiah 1:6-8)!**

Yes, **God had chosen Jeremiah to become a prophet—but how could Jeremiah ever have assumed in his own mind—that this would be a “cushy” job—as we sometimes say today—in light of the JOB DESCRIPTION that the LORD God had also given to Jeremiah that day with respect to his calling?**

ON THAT DAY...THE LORD GOD TOLD JEREMIAH: “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:4-5)!

My brothers and sisters, *God told Jeremiah to call upon the people of Judah to repent of their sins and to change their ways; furthermore warning them that a powerful, foreign army would soon sweep down upon them from the north; a people called—the Babylonians—who would invade their nation and carry off over 50% of their population—as political exiles.*

The people of Judah did not repent of their sins, however! And because the LORD God Almighty was patient and longsuffering in carrying out his judgment upon them—because of their apostasy and idolatry—the people of Judah interpreted this to mean that when it came to being a prophet—the *Prophet Jeremiah—must indeed have been a phony!*

Consequently the people of Judah decided that Jeremiah was a fraud and decided that he was lying! And so what did they do? They made Jeremiah the laughingstock among all of his compatriots! They accused Jeremiah of being a false prophet, which quite easily could have resulted in his receiving the penalty of death (Jeremiah 20:10). They cursed him! They mimicked his words! They arrested him! They beat him! At night they put him in the stocks, where every passerby could easily hit him and spit upon him (20:1-2)!

Well—here's the rest of the story—Jeremiah's prophecy did prove itself to be true and if it had not—there would be no book in the Old Testament named JEREMIAH!

Brothers and sisters, we have all heard that old adage before, haven't we? *“When the going gets tough, the tough get going?”* Did you know that this old adage is most often attributed to **the late Joseph Kennedy, the father of President John F Kennedy?** And actually, it's quite a play on words—

because it assigns some very unique and isolated meanings to those the word “going” and the word “tough!”

In the first phrase, **“when the going gets tough,”** the word **“GOING”** is used here in a very unique way—to identify a **“SITUATION”** and the word **“TOUGH,”** *short for tough people*, signifies people who are **“STRONG”** AND **“ENDURING!”** Taken together, the meaning of the phrase is: **“When some people are up against a difficult situation in their lives, those with a great deal of tenacity and persistence will resort to some form of action to hopefully correct and rectify their situation!”**

Initially, therefore, I am not sure if we could really apply this old adage to Jeremiah and to his very difficult situation or not! Why? Because instead—of Jeremiah’s **“GETTING-GOING”** Jeremiah chose instead to *find a great deal of personal fault with the LORD God Almighty!*

And yet, this certainly *wasn’t the first time* and it wouldn’t be the last time that something like this had ever happened before! *Adam found fault with his Creator*—blaming his predicament on the woman that God had given to him! *Job certainly lodged his complaints against God in the face of his devastating losses*—in terms of his family, his real estate and his own sense of personal health! *Moses found fault with God*—when *his experience of leading the children of Israel to the Promised Land* became *overwhelming* for him! The *Prophet Elijah* certainly lodged his complaints against the LORD God Almighty too, from time to time!

Similarly Jeremiah points the finger of blame at the LORD God Almighty saying to him: **“O LORD, you deceived me and I was deceived! You are stronger than I and you have prevailed! I have become a laughingstock all the day! Everyone mocks me! For the Word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long” (Jeremiah 20:7-8)!**

Instead of **“getting going”** the **Prophet Jeremiah announces to the LORD God Almighty that he was sick and tired of being a preacher!** **“Therefore, I am going to stop preaching! I am going to stop preaching the Word of God entirely!”**

But do you know what? As much as **Jeremiah wanted to stop preaching the Word of the Lord,** the **Holy Spirit of God—would simply not accept Jeremiah’s “no”—for an answer.** So Jeremiah laments now even further: **“If I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ there is in my heart, as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (9)!**

But please notice then, just how quickly that Jeremiah’s whole demeanor changes like a person who suffers from being bipolar! Jeremiah stops pointing his finger of blame towards God—and suddenly does a complete U-TURN in his thinking; even allowing the LORD God Almighty to strengthen him and to fortify him in his own personal faith and commitment to the sure promise of the LORD God’s own protection?

Jeremiah exclaims: **“But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior; therefore, my persecutors will stumble! They will not overcome me! They will be greatly ashamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten! O LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them—for to you I have committed my cause!”**

Then just like the psalmist in **Psalm 103:1-5** who preaches unto himself a much-needed sermon, saying: *“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and let all that is within me bless his holy name! Bless the LORD and forget not all his benefits; who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crown you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s!”*

So here also—Jeremiah preaches to his own self a powerful and much-needed sermon: “Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD—for he has delivered the life of the needy, from the hands of Evildoers!”

It’s almost as if God’s promise that he had made to Jeremiah back on that day when he had first called Jeremiah to become a prophet came back to him!

“Jeremiah, do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord!”

THESE WORDS THEREFORE PROVIDE TO US A MAGNIFICENT BRIDGE FROM OUR OLD TESTAMENT AND TO OUR GOSPEL LESSON TODAY! **“These twelve Jesus sent out instructing them, brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved!**

William Barclay, in his New Testament Commentary on Matthew, says this: “No one can read this passage without being deeply impressed with the honesty of Jesus. He never hesitated to tell men what they might expect, if they followed him. It is as if he said, ‘Here is my task for you—at its grimmest and at its worst—do you want to accept it?’ The world will offer a man roses, roses all the way, comfort, ease, advancement, the fulfilment of his world ambitions, but Jesus offered his men hardship and death! And yet the proof of history is that Jesus was right! In their heart of hearts human beings love a call to adventure” (THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, Volume 1, William Barclay, page 374)!

William Barclay goes on to point out to us in his New Testament commentary that there is something almost indomitable about the human spirit that often times rises to a challenge. He reminds us after the terrible destruction that had come upon the people of Dunkirk in England during World War II that what he was seeking and asking from all those who would serve in the British Armed Forces would be nothing less that their “blood, toil, sweat and tears!”

Furthermore when *Sir Ernest Shackleton proposed his march to the South Pole, during the first decade of the Twentieth Century—he posted this ad in many of England’s newspapers: “MEN WANTED FOR HAZARDOUS JOURNEY: LOW WAGES, BITTER COLD, LONG HOURS OF COMPLETE DARKNESS! SAFE RETURN DOUBTFUL! HONOR AND RECOGNITION IN CASE OF SUCCESS!”*

While Shackleton certainly expected to have an enormous difficulty recruiting men who would accompany him on that mission, but history reminds us that he was actually inundated with letters, from young and old, rich and poor, the highest and the lowest, all desiring to share in that great adventure!

Jesus knew that these disciples, who believed that he was the long-awaited and Promised Messiah of Israel, could easily be rejected by their fellow Jewish people—in their own families and among their friends, who would not share in that belief. Therefore, for these disciples to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ—meant that **they would no doubt come upon those days when they would be facing angry people! Why in addition to this, these disciples could also find themselves subject to floggings and barred from local synagogues!**

“So have no fear of them,” Jesus told his disciples, “for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops! And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:26-28)!

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is telling us to not live in the fear of Satan—who even though he may have the power to kill our bodies—still in no way, ever has had or ever will have the power to destroy our souls! Only God has this power available to them—but praise the Lord even though our God has this great power—available to him, he chooses to use that divine power to rescue us from our bondage to sin, death and the power of Satan instead and to open the kingdom of heaven for all believers!

Brothers and sisters, just listen to the encouragement that our Lord Jesus Christ gives to us still today by his resurrection power: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; for you are of more value than many sparrows!” Do you know that among all the characteristics and attributes that may be ascribed to our God—that our Heavenly Father is a “Birdwatcher” too?

In Psalm 50:11 God says: “I know all the birds of the air!”

In Psalm 147:9, the psalmist says of God: “He gives food to the young ravens when they cry!”

In Matthew 6:26, Jesus tells us in his Sermon on the Mount: “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

Therefore Jesus asks his disciples in **verse 29: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from you Father!”**

Jesus used this truth to reassure his disciples—that even though they might be at times belittled, hated, persecuted and rejected by other people in this world, that the Heavenly Father would never assume this attitude towards them.

Not only is God more powerful and authoritative than those who can only kill the body, but he cares for those who serve Christ as well. Little sparrows were of little worth in the marketplace and basically were unnoticed by people busy with their own lives! Yet the Father takes note when each one dies, reminding us that back then two sparrows were sold for a penny!

Some ornithologists claim that the sparrow is the most common bird in the world, and some ornithologists even point out to us that though the sparrow is a very common bird, that its lifestyle and habits make of it a much more interesting bird than many, far rarer birds! For example, mated sparrows fly long distances in gathering material to build their nest.

The nest of two sparrows, when it was one day dissected by a skilled ornithologist was found to contain among other components, over two thousand poultry feathers. The parent birds could only carry these feathers one at a time - and the nearest chickens were two hundred and twenty-five yards away. Their journey therefore and back forth in the building of that nest for their young—totaled 306 miles. Furthermore, if all the offspring of one pair of sparrows were to survive for ten years, the number of their descendants would be 275 trillion.

But there is no danger of our skies being darkened by vast clouds of sparrows for nine out of ten hatched live less than one year (sparrow have lived for 40). Yet the Father takes note when each sparrow dies. He does not let the physical life of a seemingly insignificant and invaluable sparrow die without His notice.-- It's a lovely little insight about the sparrows that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ shares with us this morning. But if we really want to fully appreciate the great love that our God has for us, we need to turn our attention away from sparrows—and focus it once more very purposefully on the cross. St Paul wrote these words to the Church at Corinth one day: **“The love of Christ controls us because we are convinced of this that has One died for all that we who live might live no longer for ourselves but for him who died and was raised again on our behalf!**

**From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view! Even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we do so no longer! So if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation—the old has passed away—behold the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, as has given us the ministry of reconciliation—that is—in Christ—God was reconciling the world to himself—not counting men's trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation! For our sake, God made him to be sin for us who knew to sin—so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:14-21)!
AMEN**