

Matthew 16:21-26

Pentecost 15; September 3 & 4, 2023

We've all been there. We've all been where Jeremiah was at in our first lesson for this morning to some degree. Jeremiah was at the end of his rope. God had told him at the beginning of his ministry that he was going to be proclaiming a message of judgment. God even encouraged him to not be afraid of those who would oppose him. God would be his strength and his salvation. Even though Jeremiah spoke the message that was directly from God, he was giving the people a message that they did not want to hear. Yet, that didn't stop Jeremiah from doing the job that God had asked him to do. God's Word was a delight and joy. He says: **"When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, Lord God Almighty."**

Yet, as the years went along, Jeremiah's life had been anything but joy and delight. After bearing years of persecution, God's prophet was tired. He thought that he deserved better from God. He had faithfully done his job. Yet, what changed? Nothing. In fact, from Jeremiah's perspective, things had gotten worse and not better. Jeremiah began to think: *"If God is in charge, why does it feel like I am losing?"* Jeremiah struggled to carry the cross given to him by his God. **"I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? You are to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails."** How does God respond? Does he remove the cross and persecution? No. Instead, he commands his prophet to **"repent"** and turn to God for mercy. God doesn't promise to remove the cross and persecution. Instead, HE promises to make Jeremiah strong enough to take it. God reminded Jeremiah first comes the cross and then the crown.

Just as Jeremiah needed to be reminded of the truth, Jesus reminds Peter of the same truth in our Gospel Lesson today. We pick up where we ended last week. We heard the great confession of faith that Peter had spoken. **"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."** Jesus was everything that Peter could have hoped for. He had heard Jesus preach like no one else could. He listened to Jesus teach like no one else could. Then there were the miracles. Miracles that we have seen in the last several weeks from Matthew. He saw Jesus feeding thousands. He saw Jesus walk on water and calm the winds and the waves. He saw Jesus heal a woman's daughter from demon possession. Jesus promised to give them **"the keys of the kingdom of heaven."** As they would go out into the world, not even **"the gates of Hades"** could stop them. Jesus was everything that he had hoped for and even more. Peter was ready for the crown and not the cross.

So, what does Jesus say to them? **"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."** *First comes the cross, then comes the crown.* The whole reason that Jesus came to this earth is the cross. He **MUST** go to Jerusalem, suffer, die and rise again. There was no other option. He **MUST** go and **MUST** be killed.

That was not what Peter wanted to hear. **"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"** Peter wanted to skip the cross and go straight to the crown. Instead of telling Peter what he wanted to hear, Jesus says to him: **"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."**

"Get behind me, Satan!" Can you imagine hearing Jesus say those words to you? I don't think that is the response that Peter was expecting. After Peter had confessed his Jesus being the Son of the living God, Jesus told him: **"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church."** In practically the next breath Jesus says to him: **"Get behind me Satan."** Ouch! Why did Jesus say that to Peter? Because that is exactly what Satan wanted Jesus to do. He wanted Jesus to think that **"This shall never happen to you!"** He wanted Jesus to think that he would not have to go to the cross. He knew what dying on the cross by Jesus meant. It would mean that the head of the serpent would be crushed. The death of the **"Messiah, the son of the Living God,"** on the cross would satisfy the payment for sin. Satan wanted Peter to think that Jesus didn't need to go to the cross. He wants you and I to think the same thing. Peter didn't need a Jesus who would do the things that he wanted Jesus to do. He needed a Jesus who would take up the cross and give it all.

Jesus never promised that there would not be crosses for the believer to bear in this world. He never promised that our life would always be filled with joy. Just as Jesus must bear the cross, so, he wants us to know that there will be crosses to bear. Jesus is really clear with that in our text. **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.”**

The prophet Jeremiah was at the end of his rope. Yet, God would not let him go. He gives Jeremiah a promise: **“I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you.”** What does that mean? **“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”** (Jer. 31:34) That’s what Jesus wanted Peter and his disciples to trust – first the cross, and then the crown. That’s what he wants us to believe. When we do, the words of the Apostle Paul are true: (Rom. 8:18) May God grant that we find the joy in the saying: *First the cross and then the crown.* Amen.