

Jeremiah 26:8-15
Second Sunday in Lent
March 13, 2022

Life brings many challenges. Some of them drive us to develop abilities like learning to ride a bike or to swim. Others teach us to access people or resources around us like going away to school or living in a new location or a foreign culture. Challenges can be a dare, stirring the competitive juices. Other times challenges come to us from opposition that seeks to harm us.

Last week's readings presented challenges that were met successfully: David conquered Goliath and Jesus defeated the temptations of Satan. I'm thinking especially of that last type, challenges to our faith and faithfulness as we approach today's First Lesson and identify with the prophet Jeremiah and the difficulties he encountered in his ministry. From him we learn to

MEET CHALLENGES WITH GOD'S WORD

- I. No matter how powerful
- II. No matter what the result

Challenges definitely faced Jeremiah as he served as a spokesman of the Lord. They were not unexpected, for God had told him his hearers would fight against him. He began his service during the time Josiah was king of Judah. Josiah was a godly king. You may remember how he began ruling when he was only eight years old and the reforms he led when the book of the Law was found during repairs to the temple. Yet there were also problems. He was overconfident of earthly success and went into battle against Egypt. He met defeat and was killed. His son followed him on the throne, but only ruled three months before he was deposed by the Egyptian pharaoh and replaced with another son. The pharaoh named the new king Jehoiakim. As he named him, he also controlled him and received heavy tribute from Judah.

Jehoiakim had worse qualities than being a weak ruler. He was not a believer and led the land back to idolatry. His unbelief was reflected in his disregard for people and in the injustices he inflicted while building palace additions for himself so he would look like a powerful leader. At a later time he burned the prophecy of Jeremiah and killed another prophet.

The nation was going downhill. Defeat and captivity were looming in the future. God sent Jeremiah to warn the people and gave the specific instruction, "Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word." God also had Jeremiah live a

message of warning, as he told him not to marry as an indication of the troubled times ahead, that even family ties would disappear.

Jeremiah delivered his message at the temple courtyard, so a large crowd of people heard his words of warning, including priests and prophets. The priests led worship in the temple. The prophets present were not ones legitimately called by God but had taken on the position by themselves. These religious leaders bore major responsibility for the spiritual problems in the land. So they didn't like the prophet's preaching and opposed him. "As soon as Jeremiah finished telling all the people everything the Lord had commanded him to say, the priests, the prophets, and all the people seized him and said, 'You must die!'"

They accused him of treason. "This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city," they said to the officials who had heard the commotion and gathered. It seemed impossible to them that God's temple could fall. Such a thought was blasphemous and blasphemy was punishable by death. They tried to intimidate the officials to act without evidence as they appealed to the mob, "You have heard it with your own ears!" How would you react if you were Jeremiah?

We face opposition to what God says. Some of it comes from our own sinful nature. God's Law confronts us and our sin. We may not be involved in open worship of an idol, but what about our secret trust in other things we view as more important than the Lord? It could be money and possessions, power, popularity, or our own desires. Every time we sin, we are placing ourselves above God. Part of us does not like to hear our disloyalty exposed and condemned.

Other people have the same sinful nature and may react with anger and rejection when we call for repentance. "Who do you think you are?" they may challenge us. You may meet that response from a fellow church member when you admonish his or her sin. We get a little gun shy once that happens.

Even religious leaders can be a source of opposition, just like they were in the text. As the Bible foretold, false prophets abound. Many churches do not tell what God says. They proclaim human ideas that they view as superior to his Word.

Influenced by those views, popular opinion may reject what God says. We've advanced beyond such a simple acceptance of these old stories, is the attitude of many today. You don't have to be so strict—ever hear that? Because we fear

rejection we may gloss over some truths the Bible teaches. We do not stand up for the truth of what God says.

That's not what God calls for nor what Jeremiah did. The Lord has given us a powerful weapon, his Word, to meet those challenges to our faith. Remember how the devil had to yield to it when Jesus quoted it in the temptations in the wilderness at the outset of his public ministry. That Word is there for us, as it was for Jeremiah. Remember whose word it is: that of God, the one who is supreme over all. He is the creator of the universe. He is eternal in existence and unchanging in his person. As God, he knows more than we do. Heed his wisdom rather than edit it.

His Word is the absolute truth. The Bible was inspired by God the Holy Spirit. This book is not a collection of human ideas about God. It is his revelation to us. Since it is the absolute truth, it is without error. It is dependable. You can rely on everything it tells you. Why would we want to omit or alter it? As Jeremiah declared, "The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard."

May we hold the same attitude of reverence for his revealed truth and go to it when faced with challenges to our faith, no matter what powerful opponents they come from, outside or inside of us.

II.

We want to use God's Word faithfully no matter what the result. Many times the results are positive, such as producing repentance. That was the message Jeremiah preached. "Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God." "Repent!" the prophet was calling out. Admit your wrongs and your regret for doing them. Be sorry for your sins. Be filled with the desire to stop sinning.

Instead, obey the Lord. Follow his ways. First of all, that means to believe in him. Acknowledge the Lord as the true God and your Savior. Then show your faith in your actions as you worship him alone and live in obedience to his commands.

God blesses believers. Jeremiah promised a special blessing to the people of Judah if they listened and repented. "Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you." He would not allow the destruction of their nation. He would preserve the city. That was God's original desire. He does not delight in inflicting misery and punishment. While he is just and must keep his Word, his goodness is greater and he would gladly let the nation of Judah continue and thrive.

The Lord had more goodness in mind than sparing the city or the nation. He forgives sin. He would bring that blessing through the Savior he had promised. The sending of that Savior was the reason the nation existed. He would be coming into the world through the people of Judah. We know how God fulfilled that great promise. He sent Jesus, his own Son, to redeem the world. He was the God-man, the Son of God from eternity with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and he became man by the miracle of the virgin birth. As the God-man he lived a sinless life and has provided for us his holiness. He died to remove our guilt as he suffered the pains of hell on the cross as our Substitute. We remember that act vividly during this Lenten season. We know the wonderful result he brought for us as he rose in victory, forgiveness assured and heaven waiting. That will be the total opposite of the disaster Jeremiah warned about. A powerful, positive result!

Sometimes a different result comes when God's Word is spoken. Recall Jesus' words of lament for Jerusalem in today's Gospel reading. They rejected the prophets; they rejected the Savior. Jeremiah experienced it also, which is why he is known as "the weeping prophet." He stood firm even as the opposition called for his death. He did point out the guilt they would bring on themselves, since he was proclaiming the Lord's message faithfully, just as he had been doing for twenty years. The opponents would not solve the problem by killing him, but would only add to their guilt. He spoke fearlessly and was willing to accept whatever came because he knew the need for the message he brought and the importance of turning the nation back to God. He also had the promise of strength from his Lord. When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet he had promised to make him an iron pillar and a bronze wall.

As it turned out, the officials didn't condemn him to death. However, that may have been easier than the future path. Later Jeremiah was imprisoned, he was dumped in a muddy cistern, and finally he fled to Egypt. The land of Judah met defeat at the hands of the Babylonians and went into captivity there for seventy years, just as Jeremiah foretold.

Let us learn from their history. Repent of your sins, receive God's forgiveness and experience his blessings. Then serve him faithfully. That means standing up for him when facing challenges. Do so with the Word of God, no matter how powerful the foe, no matter what results you see. God will give you strength and his goodness will go with you. You can rely on him.