

Jeremiah 23:1-8

"Coming Out of Egypt"

This Sunday we continue on through a short journey in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is one of my favorite prophets as I identify with the story of Jeremiah being called to serve God as a young man. There is a lot of inspiration in the book of Jeremiah, amidst all of the warnings that Jeremiah tells the land of Judah. The people at the time had lost their way with God and it was Jeremiah's calling to help them return to God and find the true life that can only be found in a relationship with their creator.

Here we have a people in the time of Jeremiah that had lost their way, much like the people we discussed last week. We have a population that had warnings that their way of life was not acceptable to God and they were not holding up their end of the covenant. Yet God gave the people many opportunities to get back on track with their covenant. They were simply too occupied with living a life of their own choosing rather than keeping their thoughts on God.

In the beginning of this passage, the prophet gives a warning to those who are leading the people. The warning is that the leaders are scattering the flock. The leaders are driving people away from God by their actions. This warning needed to get through to the leaders so that they could change their ways. However, in the end the leaders did not listen and therefore the exile to Babylon occurred. It would have been difficult to be a religious leader and realize that your actions had led to the downfall of many people.

While this warning is very clear for leaders in religious institutions, there is also a message of hope in this passage. God states that He will gather the flock and restore them to righteousness. This flock that God restores will have a life that is full and complete. The new flock will have the opportunity to grow and to prosper. A new shepherd will be appointed to

watch over the flock and take care of the needs of the flock. This new shepherd will have quite the high task ahead of them.

The question that comes to my mind in this passage, is who is the new flock composed of? Who will be under the new shepherd? Who will be fruitful and multiply and live in a land that will be prosperous for the people? Who is the new shepherd of the flock?

When I look to study this scripture, I see that the new shepherd of the restored flock is Jesus Christ. In the past before Christ people had to uphold the covenant to stay in a relationship with God. There were rules to follow, laws to fulfill, and works that had to be done in order to keep the people on track with God.

It was hard work and the social consequences of this situation were intense. People were shunned by other people if they broke the law or if they did not keep the rituals in a proper fashion. There was very much a action-punishment tone in society. Like I have mentioned before there was little desire to help out people who were suffering because they were viewed as receiving their just punishment from God.

However, there was a person in history that changed this. Jesus Christ came into the world so that we no longer would have to be tied to the old covenant. Jesus came into the world so that we could have a full and complete life. This new life would be accessible to all people, not just a chosen few who would do sacrifices in a temple that had become more of a political institution than a sacred space for the people. Christ is there for all people.

Yet here we are with our Messiah, Jesus Christ. Yes belief in Christ can complete one's life, but what does that look like for us today in our time and place? Where can we look for inspiration for our lives in the days to come? What can we hold on to in our society as we go bringing about the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in this world?

To envision this process, I actually look back at the text in Jeremiah. In verses 7 and 8, we have a picture of the people of Israel being led out of Egypt. This little clue into the great story of the Exodus can be a reminder of the great work that can be done through God and through people who put their full faith and trust in God. We can even look at a people that were able to live a new life free from oppression and slavery.

There are times though when I feel that I am a victim to oppression and slavery in struggles that I experience through life. The most obvious struggles that I go through are those that I face as a student. Just recently we wrapped up the fall academic quarter, so I with much joy can state that I have survived. Yet during the quarter when I am trying to work through tough assignments, I start to think about the Exodus story.

When I think about the Exodus story, I think of the magnitude of the events. I often tell myself that if God can lead the Israelites out of Egypt then surely God can help me get through my Romans research paper. It is a comfort and it puts the struggles that I face back into perspective. I know that I can get through school work and ultimately I will make it to the point where I'll be finished with current school assignments. It is with great relief that I can put these struggles that I face in the hands of God and move forward in life and forward in the academic life.

Yet with the Exodus story and the story of leaving hardship, there is a guide present. Moses was appointed by God to lead the people out of Egypt. God enabled Moses to be the leader that he need to be in order to secure the freedom of the Israelites. We have a guide in this life, which is Christ Jesus. When we face hardship we can turn to Jesus and put our struggles into the hands of Christ. It is a great comfort that we have in Christ. Christ is always with us in hardship and Christ is there when we need to be lead out of the Egypts of our lives.

When I think of being lead out of tough situations one more light hearted example occurred when I went skiing with friends from school. There was a group of about four of us and we went up to Copper Mountain to spend the day on the slopes. Our skiing skill level varied between us and I have no problem saying that I was probably weakest skier of the bunch, since the folks I went with were very skilled people. They were all very athletic people who had great endurance and ability.

Yet I want you to imagine the scene of this group of seminary skiers. Now the person standing before you is by no doubt a very large gentleman. Typically I don't see other skiers my size on the slope. The one time I did find a gentleman of my size on the slopes you would have thoughts we were long-lost cousins because of the enthusiastic joy that we found in each other. Basically what I want to convey to you is the people that I went skiing with were nearly the Corvettes of the slopes. I, on the other hand, am more like the Kenworth Semi Trucks of the slopes. I can get moving on the slopes and can haul the mail quite well. Except it takes quite a bit for me to stop. There has been many an occasion where I have lost control and I would hit the snow with quite the loud thud. I can haul the mail, that is for sure. But it requires me to be mindful of the fact that I need to constantly stay in control of my skiing, so I don't hurt anyone else on the slopes.

On this particular ski trip my friends wanted to try some more challenging runs at Copper Mountain. They wanted to try to some harder runs, which were marked as blue-black and black runs, which are meant for advanced skiers. I decided that I would take up the challenge and give it a go. However, I quickly got in over my head.

On the slopes I entered into my own Egypt of the ski slopes. I was scared and I was not sure how I was going to get down the mountain to safety. My friends were going down with ease

and I tried to keep up with them, yet I was falling farther and farther behind. It was one of the very few times that I have experience a nearly overcoming fear on the ski slopes.

However, one of my friends took notice of what was happening with me. You've met this person, and that was my friend Adrienne, who preached here at the beginning of October. She stayed back with me and coached me through the runs to get back to safety. She would ski right behind me telling me when I needed to turn and when it was safe to move faster and when I needed to go slower. She was guiding me out of what I was perceiving as danger. Adrienne was the leader that was leading me out of Egypt. She was leading me out of danger, leading me out of hardship, leading me out of fear.

When I reached the base area of the mountain, I was indeed very grateful to get to the bottom in one piece. Adrienne was a true friend and stayed with me the whole time. Yes, she made the hardship bearable and to this day I know that I would have probably hurt myself or another person had she not been there to guide me down the mountain. My other friends were happy to see that I had made it down in one piece as well, and they decided that perhaps they would take it a little easier so I could be a part of the group. That there, is the mark of good people, friends who cared enough to accommodate and care for the person that stands before you right now.

Now it is evident, that this was an Egypt of my own choosing. I didn't have to take on the run that my friends wanted to do. I didn't have to go skiing that day. In fact, I probably should participate in a safer activity. Yet what is important here is that I was in a situation where I had to rely on another person and trust that individual on getting me out of a situation that was beyond what I should have been in.

As people in life's journey, we will and we often face our own Egypt's of struggle. Many times the Egypt's that we get into are not of our own choosing. We may face an Egypt where we struggle with illness, the loss of a job, or the loss of a person close to us. What is important here is that we do not have to face our Egypt's alone.

I believe that the person that is there to guide us through and out of our Egypt's is Jesus Christ. We have the knowledge that we do not have to face struggles on our own. Christ came into this world so that we would not have to be stuck in a system that perpetuated hardship. We don't have to suffer under a system that would punish those who face hardship. It is through Christ that we can make it through the hardships of life and eventually be lead out of the suffering and pain of Egypt.

As we prepare ourselves for the upcoming Advent season, we can spend time reflecting and understanding that the ultimate gift of humanity, Jesus Christ, waits for us to come into relationship with him. We have the coming up of a Messiah that will rise up and be with us throughout our lives. We have a Messiah that stood up for the broken and the lost and lead people against the oppressive Imperial powers of his day.

Today I invite to think about how Christ can lead you out of the Egypt that you struggle with and face in your life. If you feel lost in your life and in need of the life that can be found in Christ, then come and talk with us. As a community we are here for you to help you get through the Egypt's of your life. Come and join into relationship with the Christ that will help you in your time of hardship and lead you to a life beyond that of this world.