

+++ In the Name of Jesus +++

Title: “Dodging, or Embracing, Our Fate”

Date: Sunday, 22 September 2024 (18th Sunday after Pentecost, series B // Proper 20)

Text: Jeremiah 11:18-20

¹⁸Because the LORD revealed their plot to me, I knew it, for at that time He showed me what they were doing. ¹⁹I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realise that they had plotted against me, saying, ‘Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.’

²⁰But you, LORD Almighty, who judges righteously and tests the heart and mind, let me see Your vengeance on them, for to You I have committed my cause.

AND Mark 9:30-32

³⁰They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹because He was teaching His disciples. He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill Him, and after three days He will rise.’ ³²But they did not understand what He meant and were afraid to ask Him about it.

Brenda and I recently learned that one of our family members seems to have acquired a genetic mutation that often leads to a rare type of blood cancer. That person has been experiencing some of the symptoms of that disorder for a while now, without knowing what they were. So in that sense, getting this diagnosis has been very helpful. But it also makes us wonder what’s going to happen next. And—just as important—how are we going to *respond* to whatever seems likely to happen next?

Two of today’s readings show us two different ways to respond, when any of us receive significant news about “what’s going to happen next.” In these cases, it wasn’t the medical system, but God himself, who showed somebody what lay ahead. In both cases, what he revealed was deadly serious. So, in both cases, the people who received those predictions had to “dig deep” to decide what they were going to do. How *would* they handle these major threats to their lives, that the Lord had told them about?

The first person we meet in that situation was Jeremiah. Like most of the prophets God called, Jeremiah had been pretty reluctant to “let his name stand” for that position. He was not an accomplished speaker, and he knew that the people he was going to have to prophesy against were not always going to be happy to hear what he had to say. (Jer 1:4-8) Sure enough, the messages Jeremiah delivered from God in the first 10 or so chapters of this book, stirred people up! He pointed out, time and time again, how unfaithful Israel was to God’s Word—how easily they were led astray to other gods. Now, here in chapter 11, the hostility that all of Jeremiah’s words had been generating, was coming to a head. His enemies were no longer just grumbling, but plotting against him.

We don’t hear very much at all in this reading about what sort of plot this was—whether those folks planned to poison Jeremiah’s food, run his car off the road, blow up his pager, or something else again. But whatever their plan was, *God* did not directly intervene to stop it! For sure, the Lord of heaven and earth *could* have stopped that plot, “dead in its tracks,” before it even got started. But instead, all he did was warn Jeremiah about it. Interesting, eh?

Another thing we don’t hear very much about is what Jeremiah did in response to that warning.

- Maybe he “worked from home” on the day that attack was supposed to take place...
- Maybe he took a different route to work...

- Maybe he hired a bodyguard...
- Maybe he called the cops!

The only thing we really know for sure is that this warning the Lord had given him enabled Jeremiah *somehow*, to escape from that plot—and *then also* moved him to pray this fervent and powerful prayer, that God would “**take vengeance**” on his enemies because of the way they had been planning to kill him. (v.20)

Now, that was a much *better* “plan,” wasn’t it, than if Jeremiah had decided to take vengeance on his enemies himself. Way back in the book of Deuteronomy, the Lord assured Moses, “**It is mine to avenge; I will repay.**” (Deut 32:35) That’s a promise God’s people have always been able to rely upon. Sometimes (true!), God *did* use his people themselves as his instrument *for* taking vengeance upon their enemies. Old Testament Israel in particular was often very confident and courageous in doing so. We read, for instance, in Psalm 149: “**May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands—to inflict [the Lord’s] vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with shackles of iron, to carry out the sentence written against them.**” (Ps 149:6-9)

These days, many of us find verses like that both intellectually challenging and spiritually troubling! We find it hard to believe that God would ever call on his people to be agents of violence on his behalf. But the point is—neither Israel as a whole, nor Jeremiah in particular, *initiated* any violence at all (in biblical times) without the Lord’s explicit sanction and commission. The commander of the Lord’s forces was (and is) the Lord himself, not any human being! In fact, there are several instances in the Bible where particular Israelites did “take it upon *themselves*” to punish their enemies, and received the most severe punishment from the Lord for doing so! Again, as God told Moses: “**It is mine to avenge; I will repay.**” (Deut 32:35)

And—God be praised—Jeremiah understood that, and acted accordingly here in today’s reading. “**O Lord Almighty,**” he prayed, “[**it is**] **you who judge righteously and test the heart and mind. So let me see your vengeance upon [my enemies]. For to you to have committed my cause.**” (20) Of course Jeremiah was “*itching*” to the people who had planned this nefarious plot against him, *punished*. But he knew that that was something he needed to let God take care of, *for* him. In this sense, Jeremiah was basically already praying the same sort of prayer *Jesus* went on to pray, many centuries later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the very moment *his* enemies were on their way to arrest him, beat him, and kill him: “**Father, not my will but yours be done.**” (Mark 14:36)

The difference of course is that Jesus anticipated God’s will unfolding in *his* case, in a very different way than Jeremiah did. Jeremiah wanted God to “smite” those people who were plotting against him (“**Let me see your vengeance upon them!**”). But in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus’s intent was the opposite. There’s no hint at all in this reading that Our Saviour even wanted to *dodge* that plot that was taking shape against him—much less call down a lightning-bolt from heaven against the people who were planning to do him in.

It’s possible, I suppose, that Jesus’s heavenly Father had revealed that plot to him, the same way he had revealed to Jeremiah the plot against *him*, centuries earlier. As we heard last week, Jesus was a totally normal human being, at the same time he was also God. Jesus *combined* those two (fully-human *and* fully-divine) natures in one person, in a way that nobody else in history has ever done, or ever will do again. *So*, it’s a bit of an open question, whether Jesus *perceived* this plot that was taking shape against him “directly,” through the powers of his

divine nature, or “indirectly,” as something God his heavenly Father *revealed* to him, according to his human nature.

Either way, though, it’s clear that Jesus understood, even better than Jeremiah did, the violence that was heading his way. All the Lord seems to have revealed to Jeremiah was that there *was* a plot against him: Jesus, by contrast, already foresaw many of the details of what was coming. Here in *this* prediction, we hear Jesus anticipating *three* main stages of that plan: First he would be “**delivered into the hands of men.**” Then they would “**kill him.**” Then (“**after three days**”) he would “**rise.**” (31) The other two times that Jesus spoke to his disciples directly about this, he added other details: He would “**suffer**”; he would “**be mocked**”; he would “**be spat-upon**”; he would “**be scourged.**” (8:31-33, 10:33-34) But even without those details, the basic outline of what lay ahead for Jesus was daunting and frightening. Betrayal and execution, before resurrection. What a terrible fate for him to *know* was coming his way.

Even so, Jesus made no attempt of any kind to dodge that fate. In two of his three passion-predictions (including the one we’re hearing today), all of the action-words are in the future indicative: “**The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men; they will kill him, and after three days he will rise.**” (31, cp. 10:33-34) In the third passion-prediction, his fate is (if anything) even more certain: “**The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.**” (8:31) Really? All those things *had* to happen?

Well—yes, in a sense, they did. What links today’s readings together (Jeremiah 11 and Mark 9), is the image of the lamb that Jeremiah introduces near the start of his reading. “**I was like a gentle lamb, led to the slaughter; I did not know that they had been plotting against me.**” (18) The point of that lamb imagery, to Jeremiah, was its *helplessness*: like a lamb, he too was docile, trusting, unsuspecting, innocent! Jeremiah was shocked to realize that he *had* such enemies out there, who were trying to kill him. And it was largely that sense of surprise, and outrage, and consternation, that led him to respond the way he did. “**How dare those enemies ambush me in such an underhanded, unfair way!**”

Jesus, though, was a very different sort of lamb as he was being led to the slaughter. He knew all the way along what was coming, and he totally accepted it. It doesn’t say so here in this reading, but the lamb Jesus understood himself to be was not that outraged, unsuspecting lamb of Jeremiah chapter 11, but rather the willing and sacrificial lamb of Isaiah chapter 53. “[**The Lord’s own Servant**] was oppressed and afflicted,” Isaiah had prophesied, almost a century before Jeremiah came along—“**yet he did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.**” (Isa 53:7)

The difference, you see, is that Jesus knew *his* suffering had a purpose. Jeremiah saw no purpose at all, in the plot his enemies had hatched against him; in his case, death would pretty clearly *derail* the plan that God had stretched out in front of him. He needed to be a prophet for a long time yet, before God would finally be done with him. *That’s* why Jeremiah pushed back so hard against that plot, and asked God to punish those who were behind it. But in *Jesus’s* case, it was totally different. As he told his disciples in Matthew chapter 20, “**The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**” (Matt 20:28)

I love the way the lectionary system we follow here in our church “sets these two readings down” alongside each other. I don’t think it ever would have occurred to me to read these two passages together! But when I do, I’m struck by the very different choices they offer us, when *we* have to respond to the threat of death. Those threats come our way from many

different directions, don't they?—not just external threats like other people, but internal enemies too like cancer, heart disease, liver disease, kidney disease, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's (and on and on it goes). How do you and I *face* those enemies?

- Like Jeremiah, do those “plots” surprise us, startle us, and spark such a strong sense of outrage and injustice within us, that we “call down God's own fury against them?”
- Or like Jesus, do we rather say, “Alright, this is what's going to happen: I'm going to die. Father, help me to *accept* my fate, and die well.”

Sometimes, you and I probably should “push back” against whatever that deadly force is that's threatening us. Jeremiah was not wrong to want God to punish his enemies: after all, it was God who *told* him about their plot, so obviously the Lord must have had some further plans in mind *for* Jeremiah! But even then, the *trust* Jeremiah so clearly had, *in* God's plan, comes through in a wonderfully humble and submissive way, in the very last words he spoke. “**To you, Lord Almighty, I have committed my cause.**” (20) Absolutely, Jeremiah *wanted* the Lord to *oppose* his enemies: “**Let me see your vengeance upon them!**” But even then, Jeremiah wanted *God's* will to be done—even more than his own. “**To you, O Lord, I have committed my cause.**”

If you and I are young, or if we have a lot of family responsibilities, or if our medical problems are not too far advanced, or if very good treatments are available—in situations like those, Christians have always “felt free” to *follow* Jeremiah in *pushing back* against their (apparent) fate, and praying as hard as they can for God to spare them and (so to speak) to “punish” those enemies.

On the other hand, Christians have *also* always seen the wisdom of following *Jesus's* example—especially when the sum of our years grows large, and our strength fades, and disease gets a hold, and our treatment-options are few. For us too, just as it was for Jesus, the verbs then shift into the “future indicative”: “**my life is going to end, and I am going to die—and then, when my Saviour returns, I too am going to rise!**” The *fight* goes out of us at that point, you might say—but from a Christian perspective, that's actually a good thing! It's the world that always says, “You've got to keep on fighting and never give up!” Again, in some situations, that's fine. But at the end of the day, every single one of us human beings needs to face the fact that it *is* the end of the day. And because of Jesus, we who follow him can face that end with confidence, hope, and trust that death is *not* the end—either for him or for us.

In his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul ends one of the sections of advice he's giving to those believers, by telling them: “**I say this for your benefit—not to restrict you, but so you may live in a right way, in undivided devotion to the Lord.**” (1 Cor 7:35) I want to end this sermon that same way.

- Should *you*, as *you* face whatever enemies are plotting against your life, vigorously push back against them (the way Jeremiah did), and pray that God will take vengeance upon them?
- Or should you calmly say (the way Jesus did), “Yep, this is what lies ahead: Father, help me face it”?

I don't know. Each of us Christians *has* the freedom, in Christ, to call these things as we see them, as we seek his will and put our confidence in him.

Finally, though, I fervently hope and pray that each of us *will* have the courage and the faith to pray what Jesus did, when the *certainty* of his own death drew near: “**Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.**” (Luke 23:46) In the name of Jesus, dear friends. Amen.