

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some of you know that our son James got a puppy this past spring, a male Giant Schnauzer puppy of all things. Our first family dog was a Miniature Schnauzer, and we now have a Standard Schnauzer, so James is just continuing the upward trend, I guess. Anyway, this past week was the week that Bruton had to go to the vet to get “fixed.” It’s one of those responsible things that dog owners have to do, but poor Bruton with his “cone of shame.” Of course he doesn’t understand that the cone for his own good, or that his getting “fixed” is for the common good. And that’s my only point with this story. Sometimes we have to do necessary and responsible things that are not pleasant. And that is where I am compelled to go with our readings this morning, to an unpleasant place that is nevertheless good for us in the long run.

Next week is Reformation Sunday, when we get one of my all-time favorite passages from the book of Jeremiah, which speaks of God's forgiveness and of God writing God's law on our hearts and remembering our sin no more. But there are 30 chapters of Jeremiah before that that are not so encouraging. And today's first reading is a case in point.

We didn't have the brief order of confession today. And maybe that's a good thing for where we are going today. This goes to a dark place. And when you have to go to dark places it helps to have someone holding your hand. So let me start where we did start our service this morning in remembering who we are and whose we are. We remembered and gave thanks for God's promise to Ellen and we entrusted her into God's care. And by doing that we also reminded ourselves of God's promise to each of us in our own baptism. So that is where we start, held tightly by the promises of baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now we are ready to face this first reading that we have before us today from Jeremiah. And the first thing I want you to notice here is that this is a dialog between God and God's people, the people of Israel. The people say, “forgive us even though we don't deserve it.” That sounds familiar, right? Like something we often say at the beginning of worship on most Sundays. But God's response is not what we're used to, or what we hope for when we confess our sins. God says about God's own people, “I do not accept them.” “Now [I] will remember their iniquity and punish their sins.”

It gets worse after that, in the part the lectionary folks decided to cut out. Maybe they thought we wouldn't be able to handle it. God says to Jeremiah there, “Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Although they fast, I do not hear their cry, and although they offer burnt offering and a grain offering, I do not accept them; but by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence I consume them.” And it gets even worse after that. I'll spare you the details, though.

What had they done to deserve this? It's a long list, but short, they had turned away from God to serve other gods.

What do we do with this? How does it apply to us? Surely, we are not going after other gods too, are we? As I like to remind you from time to time, Martin Luther famously said that wherever you place your ultimate trust, that is your God. So where is *our* trust? Is it really in God, or is it in power, in the ability to enforce our will on others? There's a good measure of that going on in our politics these days, which of course is a reflection of the public's attitudes. Is our trust in the might of our armies? I will admit that I take comfort in being a citizen of the country with the world's strongest military. I expect that many of you feel that way too. The Russian people have had a similar confidence in their own military, until only recently. I don't know what

the future holds for them, but right now that trust seems to have betrayed them. And then there's wealth, something else we trust in. Have you looked at your investment accounts lately? I know that my retirement funds have taken a big hit in recent months, and yet I am counting on them for my future. Do not put your trust in armies, or in wealth, says God, again and again throughout the Scriptures. And yet we do, again and again.

As I said, we did not have our brief order of confession and forgiveness this morning. But imagine if we had, and if after our confession that we have sinned against God in thought word and deed and asked God to forgive us, I had responded: "the LORD does not accept you. Now he will remember your iniquity and punish your sin." I think you might not tolerate me as your pastor for long if I kept that up.

I will not be going that direction when we come back to the confession and forgiveness next Sunday - not because I would be afraid to do that (I would) but because, unlike Jeremiah I have not been given that message to deliver to you. I do nevertheless lift up this episode in the history of God and God's people for our consideration this morning. Grasped by the promise of our baptism, we are able to come down here into the dark depths of that history to confront the reality of our own sinfulness and unfaithfulness.

This first reading has no good news in it. Let's face up to that. It ends, after God has said that God would *not* forgive - in great detail that I mostly spared you from. (You can have a look at it on your own later.) Still the people respond "we set our hope on you," because events have caused them to realize that God is now indeed their only hope.

The only good news is to be found in our Gospel reading today, and it is only good news for the one who has come to the place where we have dared to go this morning. I find it interesting that in the story of the two men that Jesus tells, there is no response from God. The Pharisee does not find out that all his "good deeds" have not made him right with God. The miserable tax collector does not hear as he returns home that his penitential prayer has been heard and that he is justified. It is Jesus, the storyteller, who tells us that. But that is crucial, because he is headed to the cross as he tells this story, bearing the consequences of the tax collector's sins and of ours, in order to fix what we have broken and to restore to us a right relationship with God and the world that God loves.

It's a difficult thing that we have done, but like James' poor dog, it has to be done. And it is not the end of our story, just as this chapter of Jeremiah is not the end of the story of the people of the people of Israel, or even of the Book of Jeremiah. We will get to that next week. It is "surely coming," to use God's words in next week's reading. So let's wait for that "surely-coming" word, and as the people of Israel in this passage put their hope in God, beyond all hope, let us also, held tightly by the promise of our baptism through whatever darkness we now face - let us also put our hope in God for Jesus' sake. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.