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Sermon: April 22, 2012
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“NO PIT SO DEEP”
Jeremiah 38:1-28

Have you ever been down so low you had to dig up just to hit bottom?

Have you ever been in a pit so deep you had no hope of getting out?

Have you ever been so trapped, so beleaguered, so oppressed you thought your life was over?

Some of us have been there in the past. Illness, pain, or depression beat us down so far that death seemed like the only way out. But then God reached down, pulled us up out of the pit, and gave us real life. That is my story.

Some of us are there right now. The day of disaster is upon us. The troubles keep coming, one after another, dragging us down, down, down. We wonder: Can I hang on for another day? Will God leave me here?

Some of us have not been there yet – but poverty, sickness, injury, divorce, injustice, or violence could take us down. We might find ourselves unable to “pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps,” crying out for rescue.

Wherever you are on that spectrum, this message is for you. Please turn with me to Jeremiah 38.

The year is 587 B.C. Jerusalem has been under siege for over a year. Many soldiers have died defending the city. Residents are dropping like flies from hunger and disease. The political entity called “Judah” is nearing extinction.

This disaster did not have to happen. Forty years ago the LORD appointed Jeremiah {1:10, 9} **“to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” “nations and kingdoms”** – above all Judah, which has become rotten with greed, immorality, injustice, false doctrine, and idolatry.

The Living God **“touched [his prophet’s] mouth and said to [him], ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth.’”** There have been words of judgment and warning, but also of invitation and promise.

YHWH has pled with Judah again and again to choose life. For decades they had a standing invitation to repent, return, and live – and they have repeatedly rejected the prophet, his words and, by extension, the One who put them in his mouth.

Some palace officials have grown so tired of Jeremiah’s message that some months ago they had him beaten and thrown in a dungeon. He would have died there, except that King Zedekiah relocated him. Still, he is not free: he is imprisoned in the courtyard of the guard.

Recently Judah passed the point of no return. Individuals and families can still be spared, but not the nation. So, at Sovereign God’s command and in an effort to save lives, Jeremiah has been urging his guards, his visitors, and everyone else in earshot to surrender.

■ Jeremiah 38:2-3: **“This is what the LORD says: ‘Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his**

life; he will live.’ And this is what the LORD says: ‘This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.’”

■ The palace officials are not pleased. In verse 4 they go to the king: “This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left...as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin.”

To be sure Jeremiah’s message of doom, in combination with Babylon’s obvious military superiority and the hellish conditions caused by the siege, is undermining the popular and false belief that Jerusalem is invincible. Some are beginning to see that, far from winning this battle *for* Judah, the Almighty is fighting *against* Judah. Hundreds of civilians, maybe more, have gone over to the enemy. Soldiers are fleeing their posts and surrendering.

At the same time, what they say is untrue. The prophet “**is not seeking**” the people’s “**ruin**”; he is seeking their greatest “**good**”.

Yes, his words *are* destabilizing the government – *for* the good of the people. His words *are* hastening the nation’s demise – *for* the long-term benefit of its citizens, especially the remnant who will go into exile. The word of the LORD is having its intended effect.

Jeremiah is not acting on his own initiative to achieve a personal agenda. He speaks God’s word at God’s command in service to God’s agenda.

■ Jeremiah is a genuine patriot. King Zedekiah should heed his words and pin a medal on his chest. Instead, in verse 5 he caves in to the pressure and tells his

officials: “He is in your hands. The king can do nothing to oppose you.”

■ So, verse 6, “they [take] Jeremiah and put him into [a] cistern ...which [is] in the courtyard of the guard. They [lower] Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it [has] no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah [sinks] down in the mud.”

Jeremiah might have thought he hit bottom early in his ministry, when {26} the priests, false prophets, and people threatened him with death for preaching that Jerusalem would fall if they did not repent.

Jeremiah might have thought he hit bottom when {Jer 11:19} men from his hometown (possibly his own relatives) plotted his murder.

Jeremiah might have thought he hit bottom when {20:1-2} the priest Pashhur had him beaten and put in stocks for preaching divine judgment on Judah.

Jeremiah might have thought he hit bottom when {36} King Jehoiakim burned his messages, then ordered his troops to find and kill the prophet.

Jeremiah might have thought he hit bottom a few months ago, when {37} he was arrested, beaten, and thrown in a dungeon.

📖 *This* is the bottom. The prophet is literally stuck in a pit, at the bottom of a cistern. A cistern is a hole in the ground that is used to collect and store water. The typical Judean cistern is pear-shaped, with a narrow opening at ground level that is usually covered with a lid, except when it is raining.

Thank God, it is the dry season and most of the water has evaporated from this cistern; if not, Jeremiah

would surely drown. But it is still wet enough that the bottom is covered with thick layer of muck.

As the man of God sinks deep into the slime his enemies slide the lid over the cistern. The pit goes pitch black. Their plan is to leave Jeremiah there until he dies of starvation or thirst.

Jeremiah cannot dig or climb his way out of this pit. He cannot beg or plead or hope his way out of it. He is powerless to change his situation.

Some of us have been there before. Some are there right now. Some will be there – so low we have to dig up just to hit bottom, so deep we have no hope of getting out, so oppressed our life is over.

Jeremiah's life is over. Except that it isn't.

■ Out of the blue in verses 7-13 a man saves Jeremiah at considerable danger to himself. His name is Ebed-Melech, and he is a most unlikely hero.

I say "unlikely" because he is a palace official.

Zedekiah is a weak monarch surrounded by strong officials. These men pull the strings. For the past nine years they have determined economic, military, foreign and religious policy, and the king has followed their lead. They are also Jeremiah's most fanatical and dangerous enemies.

So it is quite a surprise when, in verse 9 this **"official in the royal palace"** says to Zedekiah: **"My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death..."** (The Hebrew literally reads, **"he is as good as dead from starvation."**)

He is an unlikely hero because he is an outsider. Ebed-Melech is a Cushite, a black man from the area that is now Sudan.

Judahites do not discriminate on the basis of skin color. They do not think of race in biological terms.

But his mother tongue and traditions are not Hebrew – and it would be difficult to overstate the importance of these differences. Despite his high office Ebed-Melech has been, is now, and will forever be an outsider.

It is always risky for an outsider to stand against the insiders – but never more so than when power is at stake. Ebed-Melech knows this. Nevertheless, he confronts the king and rescues the prophet. He even takes care to minimize chafing as he pulls him up from the bottom of the cistern. Jeremiah is out of the pit, literally and figuratively.

Here is today's first take-away: There is no pit so deep, that God is not deeper still.

How the Lord rescues us from the pit is up to him. Sometimes he does it by a bona fide miracle. More often he works through circumstances, natural processes, and especially people.

When he rescues us is also at his discretion. The Lord saves some after hours, days, or weeks. He allows many of us to remain in the pit for months or years. Some of us are liberated only at death.

God's means and timing are might not be to our preference. But God is God, and God is right, and God is good! Just ask Jeremiah.

Here is our second take-away: We can help others out of their pit.

The Eternal LORD of hosts could have commanded his angels to lift Jeremiah. He could have caused the ground to rise under his feet. He could have turned back the clock so Jeremiah never went into the pit in the first place. Instead he sent a mortal man whom the other officials would gladly bump off, an outsider to whom the king could say “No.”

Why did God choose Ebed-Melech? He was there for Jeremiah, and he trusted YHWH.

There are people in pits all around us. Some, like Jeremiah, are innocent victims. Others got there by their own sinful choices. Both need a hand up.

Will we be there? Will we trust the LORD enough to go out on a limb and do what is right?

Some of us are in the pit today. Others will find themselves there in the future. However deep you go, however dark it gets, remember: there is no pit so deep, that God is not deeper still!

Praise God, many of us aren't in that pit today! Let's be there for those who are. Let's trust God enough to take a risk and do what is right. Let us be Ebed-Melech.

Jeremiah 38 is the word of the LORD.