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In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning’s Bible texts have a tone of urgency about them. It is as if the Lord is spurring his people onward, unwilling for them to linger overmuch with their fears and their laments, as deep as those things might be. And it occurs to me that sometimes you and I need to be braced up like this too. We need to be shaken out of our sorrows, lifted up, and pointed back to the work that lies before us and which the Lord wants us to do. So let us take a look at today’s stories about Jeremiah and Peter and see how the Lord handles them. For a beginning text, then, I lift up the answer of the Lord to the complaints of Jeremiah. The Lord answers this way:

19 Therefore thus says the LORD:
“If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me... (Jeremiah 15:19, RSV)

Now when I speak of the complaints of Jeremiah, man! could that man complain. He was a person of sensitive temperament with powers of eloquence to match the tenderness of his soul. He is “the weeping prophet,” owing to one of his wonderful laments in Jeremiah Chapter 9. It reads this way:

Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! (Jeremiah 9:1, KJV)

It is a good memory for me that, once upon a time, when Carol and I were young and hiking in the hills of Germany’s Black Forest, we chanced upon a fountain like this, with the water running and the prophet’s old words carved into the stone:

Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears...

The source of Jeremiah’s sorrows is that he has been called by God to preach repentance to an unwilling people – an unwilling people, but a people he deeply loved. Jeremiah’s destiny was to warn his neighbors of looming disaster if they would not repent and mend their ways, only they were unwilling. They would not repent. Other priests and prophets told them that
all was well, and that the dreadful things of which Jeremiah spoke would not happen. But in his heart of hearts, Jeremiah knew that he was right. He knew that he was preaching the very word of God to the people of his land. He knew that the Lord was about to punish the people for their sins and for injustice in the land, yet Jeremiah could see that his neighbors were not repenting. His job was to disturb the peace, because it was not a good peace. And so he did this thing – he preached and warned his people, making himself a pest to the world, but to no avail. He preached, the people ignored him, and disaster crept ever closer until at last the great Babylonian Empire crushed his land.

This whole sequence was agony for Jeremiah and he complained of it to the Lord. Our passage this morning picks up with Jeremiah Chapter 15 verse 15. But let me take you backwards just a few verses to see an additional element of Jeremiah’s complaint. In verse 10 we read these stunning words:

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\text{Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife}
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\[
\text{and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have}
\]
\[
\text{I borrowed, yet all of them curse me. (Jeremiah 15:10, RSV)}
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Things have got to be pretty bad for a person to say, “Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me...” Jeremiah feels alone. He feels separated from his neighbors, a burden on his neighbors, and he feels that they are all against him. That’s a pretty sad state of affairs, when you are not only lonely but believe that your neighbors dislike you and would prefer that you simply go away.

So Jeremiah complains about these things. In our passage, just a few verses after Jeremiah’s lament that his mother even bore him, we read these aggressive lines direct toward the Lord himself:

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\text{Why is my pain unceasing,}
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\[
\text{my wound incurable,}
\]
\[
\text{refusing to be healed?}
\]
\[
\text{Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook,}
\]
\[
\text{like waters that fail?}
\]

It takes some nerve to do that! It takes some nerve for a prophet – for someone appointed by God himself to preach the divine word – to turn around and say to the Lord, “Are you a deceitful brook for me, like waters that fail?” But Jeremiah does this. With his eloquence, he puts into words his objections to the Lord.

Now, the fascinating thing about the Lord’s answer to Jeremiah is that the Lord does not pause a moment to deal with Jeremiah’s complaints. The Lord simply calls upon Jeremiah to repent. And so in the very next verse after
Jeremiah’s words about a deceitful brook, the Lord entirely bypasses Jeremiah’s complaints and calls upon the man to mend his ways:

19Therefore thus says the LORD:
   “If you return, I will restore you,
   and you shall stand before me... (Jeremiah 15:19, RSV)

It is as if the Lord is saying, “Jeremiah, we do not have time for this. Pull yourself together. The train is zooming down the track toward the people. Your job is to warn them. Your job is to cry out to them. We do not have time for you to be so preoccupied with yourself. If you return to me, I will restore you, and we will move on with the work that needs to be done, for it is urgent.”

For, you see, the Lord loves Jeremiah’s neighbors every bit as much as Jeremiah does himself. In fact, the Lord loves them more than Jeremiah does or ever could. There is a depth of love in God that will brook no delay. In his love, the Lord means to punish Judah and to direct her back toward faithfulness. But he would prefer not to punish. He would prefer to spare the people. And he is counting on Jeremiah to help give the people a chance. His job is to preach repentance to them, and it is needful for Jeremiah to turn to the work God asks him to do.

Now let us turn to our Gospel Lesson. We will find the same pattern with Peter as we saw with Jeremiah except even more explosive. Jesus has told his disciples about his cross. It is coming toward him. He does not have much time. Jesus is resolved to meet and to bear his cross, but Peter objects. He speaks firmly to Jesus:

22And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying,
“God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”
(Matthew 16:22, RSV)

Peter, my brother, what are you thinking? Do you suddenly make yourself the master and Jesus the disciple? Do you dare rebuke your Lord?

Well, you know the story. Jesus will have nothing to do with Peter’s assertion of authority. He calls the man, Satan! That is pretty awful, when the true and rightful Judge of all reality turns to you and says

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me...”
(Matthew 16:23, RSV)

Most people, you know, are natural philosophers. They recognize the principle of the thing. I have no doubt that Peter objected to Jesus suffering the cross because he loved Jesus and did not want to see his Master suffer. But
Peter probably also saw the principle of the thing: if the Master heads to the cross, the disciples could well end up there too.

And lest there be confusion about this point, Jesus nails it down. Jesus pulls no punches for his disciples. He is forthright with them:

24Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself [let her deny herself] and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24, RSV)

Again, it is as if the Lord is saying to the disciple who complains of the cross, “We do not have time for this! We cannot delay. We are heading toward Jerusalem, we are heading toward my cross, and how constrained I am that I should accomplish my mission. For my mission is a great one! My Father and I and the Holy Spirit so love this old world that I am off to die, that this world might live. Stick with me, cling to me, for in me there is inextinguishable life. Follow me, even though you risk a cross because of your following. Follow me in spite of all, for whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

And so it is, my friends, that this morning’s Bible lessons would brace us for the path of discipleship ahead of us. Let us have no doubt that Jesus knows and cares and sympathizes with us if we should be downhearted at some point in our life. Jesus knows our troubles, even if no one else in this world should suspect. If we should be blue or weary or tempted or close to worn out by pressures at home, pressures at work, Jesus knows all of this and sympathizes with us. And in the end he means to grant us a season of peace and eternal salvation in eternity. But meanwhile, work in his name is awaiting. Our neighbors need our help. They need us to do our jobs with energy, with integrity, and with as much cheerfulness as we can bring. Our families and friends need the same thing. They need us to pick up our heads, cast our eyes forward again, and return to the path of love that lies before us with as much strength and integrity and cheerfulness as we can bring. Our church needs us to contribute our presence and our strength to this congregation. Immanuel Lutheran Church needs us to give an encouraging word to one another and to work for our Christ-appointed mission in this world to bring souls to him and to teach them the faith of the church. There is too little time to delay, too little time to be so preoccupied with ourselves. He who fights for us is more than all they that fight against us. Why, the very wellspring of Life has called us to follow him. He called us when we were baptized. Or he will call us when we are baptized – soon, I hope! And he will renew the call every time we meet him at the Holy Communion. Always, always Jesus is saying to us, take up your cross and follow me, for we have some good work to do in this world. Fight through your weariness and your discouragement. Fight through all obstacles as best you can. As Jesus once walked by the Sea of Galilee and called fishermen to follow him, so he has
called us. It is his nature. He is always calling people to follow him. He is not content to work in this world alone. He wants us to join him in a life of love and service to this world – a life of love in his name, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen