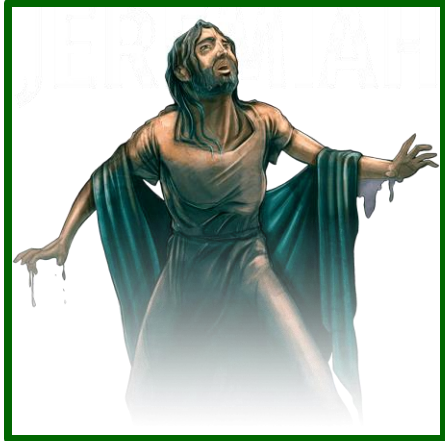


## REFLECTIONS FOR THE 22<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 03 SEPTEMBER 2023

### The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

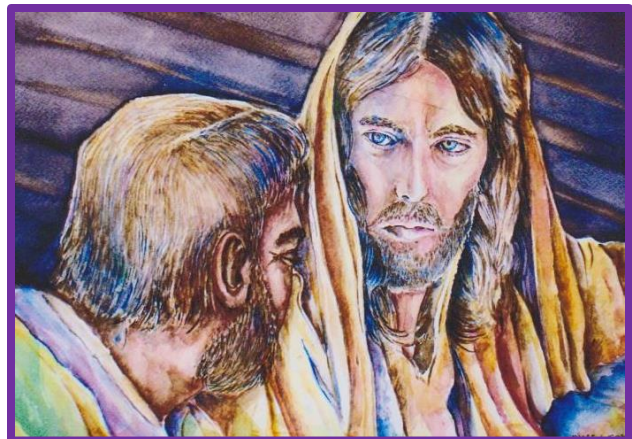
***Distress, hope, daring*** – these three emotional responses are threaded through today's readings from the Liturgy of the Word for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, again emphasizing that "Ordinary Time" in our liturgical year is far from ordinary!



Jeremiah is distressed by his ministry marked by being a "laughingstock" and a source of mockery for everyone whom he encounters. In no uncertain terms, he blames God who, he feels, enticed him and overpowered him. The word of God has become for him "a reproach and derision." He goes so far as to say that he will no longer even speak God's name. In fact, at the midpoint in his ministry, Jeremiah is crying out in lament (in this mid-point of his ministry, he is engaged in a series of such laments). The one who is meant to be a sign of hope for the people of Judah as the exile draws near is himself seemingly turning away from the One who called him to be a prophet.

In one of the final chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul appeals to the members of this Christian community to "present your bodies as living sacrifice" (Rom 12:1). And in Matthew's Gospel, immediately after Jesus has praised Peter for naming him "the Son of the Living God," Peter rebukes Jesus for saying that he will suffer and die and be raised on the third day. Jesus speaks strongly to Peter, calling him a stumbling block and even in a more startling manner says to him, "Get behind me Satan." This was the same Peter whom Jesus had declared would be the rock on which Jesus' new church community would be based. Jesus adds that to become his follower means denying yourself, taking up your cross and following him.

Whether we listen to Jeremiah, Paul, Jesus, or Peter, the words speak to ministry in the context of anger, fear, distress, and loss of hope. I expect that most of us would be able to remember such times in our own lives when following the way of the Christian seemed to bring pain rather than promise, loss rather than hope, and distress rather than joy. We may have blamed God for deceiving us by calling us to be missionary disciples. Even more, we may have turned away from God and Jesus, feeling that God had first forgotten or turned away from us.



Yet today's readings, despite the deep emotional distress, carry so much hope. In Jeremiah's own Hebrew tradition, psalms of lament name the realities of life in all their challenges but always end by words of trust in God's presence. Jeremiah's lament here is clearly in that tradition. In the verses of today's passage, Jeremiah declares his certainty that God will come to his rescue and overcome his enemies. Then in continuity with the form of the lament, he acknowledges that this has already happened, "Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of

the needy from the hands of evildoers” (Jer 20:13). Like the psalmist, Jeremiah will utter several more laments with the same pattern before he finishes!

We know that Peter, whom Jesus has so soundly condemned, will go on to deny Jesus in the courtyard before his passion and then become the leader of the newly founded church. For all Peter’s bluster, he is aware of his weaknesses, repents his failings, remains faithful to the One who called him the rock, and himself is crucified for his steadfast loyalty. Jesus, despite his anger in this moment, continues to hold him as one of his closest disciples and trusts him to be the leader of the new church community.

Psalm 63 holds the words that hold us in hope, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you. . . and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me” (Ps 63:1, 7-8). This is my favourite psalm, the one that has been in my spirit and in my heart when I have felt the distress or fear or anger in my own ministry, the one that brings me hope when I most need it.



But the readings today carry more than distress and hope. They also dare us, in the face of distress and with the strength of hope, to go even beyond where we are at any moment in our lives. Jeremiah, despite his vocal laments, will be a voice for the people of Judah as they face exile and then as the exile becomes far too real for them. He himself will go into exile in Egypt. He first calls them during their time in exile, “Set up road markers for yourself, make yourself signposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went” (Jer 31:21). And then he echoes God’s promise of a new covenant, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the

house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:31-33).

Paul, in his words to the Romans, trusts that they will find their way, “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). Peter, knowing his own weaknesses, remains a strong, loyal and faithful leader of the new church, trusting himself in that ministry and trusted by God to carry out that ministry.

The spiritual writer, Jan Richardson, expresses well how the Gospel reading calls each one of us to dare to find our own way in relationship with God and one another:

Jesus’ words here call us to recognize and release whatever hinders us from full relationship with God and one another. Self-denial challenges us to know the stumbling blocks within our own selves. It beckons us to open ourselves to the one who is the source and creator of our deepest self. And self-denial compels us to ask ourselves, “What are the actions, what is the way of being, that will leave the greatest amount of room for God’s love, grace, and compassion to move in and through me?” A single form of self-denial

won't fit for all, and one of the greatest ways we can harm ourselves and others is to follow a path that's not meant for us. He doesn't say that his followers should take up the cross that will be his own to bear, or that we should carry a cross that someone else has forced upon us. Rather, Jesus compels us to find the particular path that will enable us to do the work of giving up all that separates us from God, from one another, and from our deepest selves.



This is one further dimension of today's readings that make them so suitable for the first Sunday in the Season of Creation. As you know, the Season of Creation was initially established by the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I, then adopted by the World Council of Churches, and approved for the Roman Catholic Church by Pope Francis in 2015. The season starts on September 1, the Day of Prayer for Creation, and ends on October 4, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology. This year, Pope Francis has

announced that, on October 4, he will release an apostolic exhortation on the environment, providing an update to his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si', On Care for Our Common Home*.

In the context of our readings today, Earth herself is experiencing great distress. Think for a moment of this past summer alone with its major wildfires, storms, flooding, droughts, and record-breaking temperatures, extreme weather events and catastrophes affecting people across five continents. Scientists have recently expressed grave concern that the Atlantic Ocean's vital currents could collapse bringing about a global catastrophe. Signs that human activity has continued to damage Earth include global warming caused by fossil fuels, biodiversity loss, plastic pollution, deforestation, air pollution, melting icecaps and sea level rise, ocean acidification, food and water insecurity, fast fashion and textile waste, and soil degradation.

Hope comes from the efforts of many organizations, groups, and individuals as they seek to work together to acknowledge the damage that we are doing to Earth. These words from the documents introducing this year's theme for the Season of Creation, "Let Justice and Peace Flow," say it well:

"Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5: 24). We are called to join the river of justice and peace, to take up climate and ecological justice, and to speak out with and for communities most impacted by climate injustice and the loss of biodiversity. "A mighty river" is the symbol chosen to go with this theme, representing biodiversity at risk. The urgency is growing, and we must make peace with the Earth and on the Earth visible, while justice calls us to repentance and a change of attitude and actions. When we join the river of justice and peace with others, it creates hope instead of despair.

The daring comes with the need for a dramatic shift in our own consciousness. We need to move from seeing Earth as an object to be protected to a subject with its own value and voice. This is well described by the following principles identified by the Earth Bible Project:

1. Intrinsic Worth = the universe, Earth, and all its components have intrinsic value/worth.
2. Interconnectedness = Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.



3. Voice = Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.
4. Purpose = the universe, Earth, and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.
5. Mutual Custodianship = Earth is a balanced and diverse domain in which responsible custodians can function as partners, rather than rulers, to sustain a balanced and diverse Earth community.
6. Resistance = Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.

Distress, hope, and daring are embedded in today's readings in the Liturgy of the Word. They call us to acknowledge our own suffering and pain, to find hope in the richness of our tradition revealed in the universe and in the scriptures, and to dare to be the ones our creator and creating God calls us to be.

For us in Canada, tomorrow Monday is Labour Day (Peru celebrates this day on May 1, the feast of St. Joseph, the Worker). We are becoming more intentional about advocacy for decent work described in this way by the International Labour Organization:

Decent work is work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

This is our blessing (adapted from John O'Donohue) for all whose work supports our lives and ministries, for all those with whom we work, for all those who work in our sponsored ministries, and for all those whose work builds a society of peace and justice and well-being.

May the light of your souls guide you.  
 May the light of your souls bless the work  
 You do with the secret love and warmth of your hearts.  
 May you see in what you do the beauty of your own souls.  
 May the sacredness of your work  
 bring healing, light and renewal to those  
 who work with you and to those who see  
 and receive your work.  
 May your work never weary you.  
 May it release within you wellsprings of refreshment,  
 inspiration and excitement.  
 May you be present in what you do.  
 May you never become lost in the bland absences.  
 May the day never burden you.  
 May dawn find you awake and alert,  
 approaching your new day with dreams,  
 possibilities and promises.  
 May evening find you gracious and fulfilled.  
 May you go into the night blessed, sheltered and protected.  
 May your souls calm, console and renew you.

