

# TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## LECTIONARY #120

READING I Jeremiah 38:4–6, 8–10

### A reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah

In those days, the **princes** said to the **king**:

**“Jeremiah** ought to be put to **death**;  
**he is demoralizing the soldiers** who are left in this **city**,  
 and all the **people**, by **speaking** such things to them;  
 he is **not interested** in the **welfare** of our **people**,  
 but in their **ruin**.”

King **Zedekiah** answered: **“He is in your power”**;  
 for the **king** could do **nothing** with them.

And so they **took Jeremiah**  
 and **threw him** into the **cistern** of Prince **Malchiah**,  
 which was in the **quarters** of the **guard**,  
 letting him down with **ropes**.

There was **no water** in the **cistern**, only **mud**,  
 and **Jeremiah** sank into the **mud**.

**Ebed-melech**, a court official,  
 went there from the **palace** and said to him:  
**“My lord king**,  
 these **men** have been at **fault**  
 in all they have **done** to the **prophet Jeremiah**,  
**casting him** into the cistern.

He will **die of famine** on the **spot**,  
 for there is **no more food** in the **city**.” >>

Their anger and hostility should be immediately apparent.

Their self-interest persuades them they are doing the right thing.

Zedekiah sounds like Pilate in abdicating responsibility.

Use the details to suggest the horror of being lowered into this sure death trap.

Pause before starting this new beat that brings hope back into the story.

His tone is confident; these are the words of a truly righteous man.

### READING I

Jeremiah prophesied in the seventh century BC, when the Babylonian empire was on the rise. At the time of today's prophecy, King Zedekiah reigned in Jerusalem, placed on the throne by Babylon. Zedekiah, however, defied Babylon, leading to a year-and-a-half siege of the holy city. During this time, Jeremiah prophesied, proclaiming a message that enraged the princes who claimed that Jeremiah was demoralizing the soldiers still left in the city. Jeremiah had announced, "This city shall certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon; he shall

capture it." His prophecy conflicted with the military strategies of the princes, who brought their accusations against him to Zedekiah. Fearful and weak, at one moment listening to Jeremiah and at another to the princes, Zedekiah gives in to the princes' demands. He gave them free rein, saying of Jeremiah, "He is in your power." Though the princes had claimed that Jeremiah should be put to death, suggesting an immediate execution, they chose instead to throw him into a muddy cistern, intending to make him a humiliating

spectacle whose prophetic word would be ridiculed.

A foreign court official named Ebed-melech warns Zedekiah that Jeremiah will die of famine if he isn't rescued from the cistern. The king who had approved the violent action against Jeremiah orders Ebed-melech to rescue the prophet before he dies. Zedekiah's instability and weakness reflects the instability and weakness of the nation itself. Standing against the faithlessness of the king, the princes, and the people, Jeremiah, released from the cistern, continues to fulfill the role that

Now, Zedekiah speaks with greater confidence and authority for he knows he's doing the right thing.

For meditation and context:

Pause briefly after the salutation.

If you have statues or stained glass depicting the communion of saints, you might want to throw a glance in that direction as you speak this line.

The key words in these lines are "persevere" and "Jesus."

Stress Jesus' willingness to suffer for us.

"So that you may not grow weary . . ." should be spoken with great sincerity.

A fast delivery will obscure the meaning of the final sentence. Read slowly, with awareness of the great cost of discipleship.

God had given him: "To root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant."

**READING II** After the review of people of faith from the Jewish tradition, the author of Hebrews moves from the past to the present. "A great cloud of witnesses" including both the ancestors and more recent people of faith surround us today. We can envision a crowd watching and encouraging us, pictured as athletes running a race. The witnesses are able to give sound advice because they have com-

Then the king ordered Ebed-melech the Cushite to take three men along with him, and draw the prophet Jeremiah out of the cistern before he should die.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 40:2, 3, 4, 18 (14b)

R. Lord, come to my aid!

I have waited, waited for the LORD,  
and he stooped toward me.

The LORD heard my cry.  
He drew me out of the pit of destruction,  
out of the mud of the swamp;  
he set my feet upon a crag;  
he made firm my steps.

And he put a new song into my mouth,  
a hymn to our God.

Many shall look on in awe  
and trust in the LORD.

Though I am afflicted and poor,  
yet the LORD thinks of me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
O my God, hold not back!

READING II Hebrews 12:1-4

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews

Brothers and sisters:

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.

For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God.

Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart.

In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.

pleted the race themselves. They know it is necessary for runners to rid themselves of any burden that would encumber their movement forward. The greatest burden that weighs on us is sin, making running arduous and painful. We must rid ourselves of the weight of sin, casting it off like clothing that clings to us and prevents us from running. The surest way to reach what lies before us is to keep our eyes on the ultimate goal, Jesus himself.

Having completed the race, Jesus is the perfect model of faith and endurance. Though he was not burdened by sin, he

took upon himself the burden of the cross. He knew the joy that awaited him at the completion of the race. Sinless himself, he endured the opposition of those who were sinners. In his faithful perseverance, Jesus was leader and model for all of us who run the race, so that we may not grow weary or lose heart. Many of those witnesses, as well as Jesus himself, persevered to the point of shedding blood. Though we have not witnessed so completely, the fidelity of those who have gone before us reminds us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, no matter the cost.