KEEPING UP WITH HORSES

Pilgrim Church, Duluth April 5, 1981 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Jeremiah 12.5

There is a country-western song that in its maudlin way comes close to the complaint of Jeremiah. "This Time you Gave me a Mountain." I don't recall the lyrics, but the songhas the singer say that he's been through some hard times and taken them in stride. No matter what the Lord threw at him, he met the challenge without losing his faith. But now something so big has come along that he doesn't know how he can get over it. "Lord, this time you gave me a mountain."

I think most of us know what the song writer means. That's the appeal of Nashville. It may be trite and it may be corny, but it does manage to say at times how we feel.

"This time you gave me a mountain." That mountain appears in many ranges. Sometimes it rises like a butte right out of the flat-land. It may loom up as an overwhelming grief, the defeat of a cherished ambition, the break up of a love affair or as some other unbearable loss. On the other hand, the mountain may confront us as something more positive that we cannot handle--fame, fortune, or some tempting attraction. We say to ourselves cockily, "this thing can't get to me." We go walking jauntily down the plain when suddenly this awesome height is there in front of us. We can't seem to climb over it and we can't get around it.

Now we look up and with a querelous voice we cry, "look here, Lord, I've gone down all the bumpy roads and through all the misty swamps. I've fought the good fight, I've run the race, I've kept the faith. And what is more, I've been a pretty good boy, or a pretty good girl, considering. But Lord, I don't know what to make of this thing. This time you gave me a mountain."

I think that's how Jeremiah felt. That's the mood of his prayers. He endured ridicule and persecution. He found his neighbors in Anatoth turning against him, yet he kept delivering the message God gave to him. God had told the prophet at the outset that he would be like a fort, a fort defending the truth against priest, prince and king. Jeremiah accepted that role, hard though it was. He trusted God's promise. "They will fight against you, but they will not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you."

But it is one thing to endure opposition; it is another to come to the conclusion that one's efforts are pointless. It is one thing to stand for the right in the face of ridicule and persecution; it is another to see the wrong triumphing all around you. What is the point of all this? It seems only too evident that nobody is listening. The very things the prophet attacks are the things that bring people happiness. Or so it seems. "Why do the wicked prosper?" Answer that one, God, if you can? "Why does the land mourn because people say you don't know or care about what they are doing?"

Well, as Liz told you last Sunday, the Lord doesn't give a straight answer to Jeremiah's question. Instead he puts a question of his own:

"If you have raced with men on foot and they have wearied you,
how will you compete with horses?

And if in a safe land you fall down,
How will you do in the jungle of the Jourdan?"

Suppose we translate that into our own setting:

"If you can't run around the track with the crowd at the Y, How do you expect to keep up in the Kentucky Derby?

And if you can't walk down 4th Street without falling on your face, how do you expect to hike through Superior National Forest?"

Which is to say, "You haven't even been tested yet!"

This seems like a very cruel rejoinder. Of course, we must remember that all of this goes on inside the prophet's head. This is Jeremiah's own interpretation of what God is saying to him. But what made him think the Lord was answering his own questions with such questions as these? Why did the prophet feel that this private exchange with God was worth preserving along with his public speeches?

Evidently there was something in the Lord's rejoinder that kept the prophet going, that renewed his stamina. What was it?

Well, I suppose we may say in the first place that the Lord's rejoinder was realistic. This was no time to indulge in theological speculation. Maybe after the strife is over and he's lying on some warm Mediterranean beach, Jeremiah can write a treatise on why the wicked prosper. This is no time for self-pity either. Later on when his life is not in danger, the prophet can feel sorry for himself. But right now he needs to get on with the job. For a realistic appraisal of his situation indicates that things are going to get worse before they get better.

"Your own brothers have dealt treacherously with you," God tells Jeremiah. "Be on your guard."

The Lord's sharp question about keeping up with horses kept the prophet from letting his feelings run away with him. It made him face facts.

Secondly, the Lord's rejoinder to Jeremiah goaded him to keep on running.

There are times when a good teacher or coach must give this kind of rejoinder to a complaining pupil. In his book Life on the Mississippi, Mark Twain tells of his effort to learn how to be a steamboat pilot under the tutelage of a certain Mr. Bixby. Mastering this trade was far more difficult than young Sam Clemens had imagined. He had to know the river better, Mr. Bixby told him, than he knew the halls in his own house. But unlike those halls, the river was constantly changing. Sam was discouraged and humiliated by his repeated mistakes, which inevitably aroused his teacher's harsh sarcasm. Like Jeremiah he said to himself, "I wish I were dead." He thought of a thousand ways to murder Mr. Bixby too. Finally, Sam Clemens told his teacher:

"I want to retire from this business, I haven't got the brains to be a pilot."

But Mr. Bixby would not accept the young man's resignation.

"Now drop that!" He barked. "When I say I'll learn a man the river, I mean it, and you can depend on it, I'll learn him or I'll kill him!"

Well, Sam Clemens, Mark Twain, did learn the river.

"How will you compete with horses?"

It is the sort of divine question aimed at bringing out the human potential.

Somewhere a long time ago, I read that the foot messengers who ran in relays in ancient Greece covered more miles per day than the Pony Express.

Thirdly, God's rejoinder was comforting. I mean in the true sense of the word, which means literally, "Making strong."

One of the most widely circulated sermons is the one by the Scottish preacher, Arthur John Gossip called, But when Life Tumbles in, What Then? The language and the style are old fashioned, for this sermon was preached over half a century ago. Still, it continues to be read. Most editions of the sermon contain an author's footnote on the first page.

"This was the first sermon preached after my wife's dramatically sudden death."

And the text? It is Jeremiah 12.5.

"How can you compete with horses?" You see there's hope in that. God brings an expectation here. God brings the assurance of a future, not an easy future, but one where God is present. God's expectations and God's comfort are always two sides of the same coin. Do you remember the first thing Christ said to Peter after Peter's betrayal?

"Feed my sheep."

Everything Peter needed was in those three words--forgiveness, hope, work, a vote of confidence. It was like that too, I think, with Jeremiah.

So then there are these mountains. And we complain about them. They oughtn't to be there at all, we say, not in a world that's run the way it should be. And God doesn't argue the matter. God just gives us a wack in the seat of the pants and up and over we go. And though we won't admit it, there's mercy in that.