

Until about two hours ago I was on a servant event with Lisa Ticaric and six of our high school youth in San Jose IL. If you don't know anything about San Jose, let me inform you. San Jose is a town of about 6 or 7 hundred people almost exactly between Springfield and Peoria. Like hundreds of other rural towns throughout the United States, San Jose is a farming community that used to be a thriving small community of farmers, teachers, merchants, pastors and various people who served those farmers' needs. But sadly, in the days of the mega farms where even a thousand acres cannot support one family anymore because of the high cost of labor, equipment, fuel and seed, the town is slowly dying and leaving behind an impoverished cluster of families who can no longer make a living in San Jose and are too poor and sometimes under educated to compete even in the small cities of Springfield and Peoria. There are no stores within miles in any direction and only one gas station. All the schools are closed and the kids are all bused 12 miles to Mason City. There are no youth programs, no public pools, and three tiny parks that are covered with graffiti and filled with kids on bikes riding around aimlessly and looking for something to do.

Yesterday, after we had completed the work we were doing, we gathered back at the little church, St. Luke's, that hosted the event. During the week, our six youth joined with 20 other youth from Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio to replace a back porch, replace multiple windows, replace a front porch and the roof, trim brush, drywall many rooms, build a new shed and steps to a back door and build soccer goals for San Jose as they prepare to host their first annual soccer camp for the children of San Jose. When we returned to the church, we climbed a little hill outside the church where there was a cross and if you sat at the foot of the cross the valley rolled out in front of you for miles and miles. For six days I had not thought of bills that need paying or retirement funds that are shrinking. I had not watched a single thing on TV except for 15 minutes of Judge Judy at our host home which only received 3 channels. I hadn't thought about getting to the grocery store, dry cleaners or drug store. Rather, I had only worked to help people have a better life, studied the Bible and slept and that had been my whole focus. That was my view from the foot of that cross on the hill outside of St. Luke's Lutheran Church; people who needed help and the aid we were providing.

In our Old Testament text, we see Jeremiah struggle with his focus. He is a human being like all of us. He has hopes and dreams like all of us and he is called to be a prophet of God – a job frankly no one really wants. His friends encourage him to give it up and enjoy life a little. Who needs this thankless prophet business? He complains about being laughed at and mocked. People accuse him of being an alarmist, “terror on every side!” In the face of the worlds nagging and criticisms, it is easy to forget the view from the foot of the cross.

Jeremiah reminds himself that the Lord is with him and the Lord is a “Dread Warrior.” We don’t hear God described like that very often do we? In fact it only shows up once in the Bible – right here in Jeremiah. We like to think of God as a loving grandfather not a dread warrior. However, if you were walking through the streets of South Chicago on a dark night, who would you rather have with you? A loving grandfather or a dread warrior? I personally would rather have a dread warrior. We have a God who fully and completely loves us and also defends like a lioness defends her cubs. In fact, nothing can happen to us outside his will. That does not mean that only good stuff happens. Loving grandfathers sometimes cannot bear to allow their grandchildren go

through hardship. The Dread Warrior however, lives at the foot of the cross always and always keeps his focus. Whatever happens in mortal life, he sees the vision beyond the moment and keeps us on the path. It may be that the path is thorny and frightening but the Dread Warrior walks with us and that is why we know that we can conquer every challenge.

The difficulty is the same difficulty Peter had. We are fine until we take our eyes off of Jesus. As long as we stay seated at the foot of the cross, we are fine, but as soon as we wander off, we begin to sink. We are constantly caught, like Jeremiah, like Jesus between the world and the Dread Warrior. But Jesus empowers us through his Word, Holy Baptism and his supper to stay seated, not to be tempted, but to remain resolute in pursuing good and the needs of others knowing that this is the way of the cross and that this is the way of joy.

We don't think we have the ability to do what God calls us to do. We think we are too weak, too sinful but the fact is that God, the Dread Warrior, empowers us to do whatever he calls us to do. We may forget that when we lose focus, when we wander off from the foot of the cross, but God calls us back, over and over again and reminds us that

our call is to serve him through serving others and that is where we find true joy. There is nothing God calls us to do that we cannot do. We may not want to do it. Other paths may look easier and even more fun, but we have not been called down those paths and that is not where our Dread Warrior walks. AMEN.