

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
30 August 2026
Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

“The Rabbi’s Question”

There is not one person, family, or community for whom everything comes up roses every time. We have all known times when things don’t turn out as we hoped, planned, or believe we deserve. In spite of our good intentions, fervent prayers, or best efforts, plans may fail, health may suffer, family and friends may disappoint, and social harms – natural, human driven, or random – seem endless.

Any of these may evoke that timeless, often painful, and very human question: *Why?*

Some folks place that “Why” at the feet of the God or higher power they believe controls the universe of events. But such belief comes with a complex theological question of its own, perhaps most famously expressed by Rabbi Harold Kushner (1981):

Why do bad things happen to good people?

That question does not arise directly in today’s readings, but is embedded in them, as the prophet Jeremiah and Jesus confront the human price of staying true to their divine call.

Jeremiah’s mission was to decry corruption, call out idolatry, and warn of social injustice. This did not endear him to those in power, who, at the least, treated him as a public nuisance, and at worst, as threat enough to plot his destruction.

With that, I suppose we have one response to Rabbi Kushner’s question:

Bad things sometimes happen to good people when they raise issues we would rather not hear, when they name a truth about ourselves that we would rather not face. Ruffle the feathers of the privileged or powerful, and prepare to be cast as just another soft-headed liberal, dismissed as naïve, judged a religious nut, or face persecution, exile, or even death.

Jeremiah certainly paid the price – a bad thing did, indeed, happen to a good person.

Seven hundred years later comes Jesus, whose own message was deeply in tune with Jeremiah’s, which we hear echoed in Paul’s letter to the Romans – that the Kingdom of God means welcome to the stranger, food for the hungry, relief for the poor, and justice for the oppressed.

It is not only love of God *and* love of neighbor – it is love of God *by* love of neighbor.

As for his fidelity to that message, we hear Jesus tell his disciples the price he knows he will pay. And what an exquisitely dear price it will be:

He will be set up for false arrest and undergo a trumped-up trial while an ugly crowd mocked him and egged on the agents of the state charged with humiliating him and carrying him off – their public roar made all the louder by those who stood silent, some of whom *wished* it would stop, but would not stand up or speak out against it.

A bad thing was, indeed, happening to a good person – a wholly good person – and not from anything *God* did, but because of what human *beings* are willing to do, when they know not what they do, especially when influence, affluence, or supremacy is threatened.

Not just the stuff of the ancient world, it seems.

In that, it seems we have another answer to the rabbi's question: Sometimes bad things happen to good people simply because they *are* good. The world can be horribly unkind to the message of justice, mercy, and peace. There is no promise of an easy road for true advocates of the common good, which is another name for the Kingdom of God. The messengers are often targeted, which is what Jesus is conveying here. He knows he will suffer injustice and indignity and, in the end, a terrifying state-sponsored execution specifically designed to deter others from even thinking about following that path.

For his part, Peter cannot stand this idea, and implores his teacher, "*God forbid it, Lord!*"

But Jesus does not blame God for his situation. He does, after all, have a choice. Even as he faces the ultimate price for his discipleship, he decides that is more tolerable than the cost of betraying his spiritual and human integrity. He will not abandon the Way of Love, which would be a betrayal of the *God* he loves.

In holding *to* that deepest integrity, even as the very baddest thing was happening to very goodest person, Jesus remarkably, stunningly, unimaginably, finds peace of mind.

He is not only the master teacher – he is the truest disciple.

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Stuff happens in this life. Sometimes it is a result of our choices, but at other times, there *is* no explanation for what befalls us, much less some kind of divine puppeteering at play. And it is also true that meaning well, working hard, or having faith does not inoculate us from the effects of a natural world, an imperfect world, a random world. Sometimes bad things happen because well, because stuff happens.

But no matter *what* befall us, and through it all, the Gospel makes clear what true disciples are called to do: By our every word, prayer, and action – personal, communal, national, and global, we must continue to follow the Way of Jesus, which we call the Way of Love. We are called to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (*Micah 6:8*).

It may not turn the tide overnight. We may not see the Kingdom of God fully expressed in this lifetime. We may not yet have peace at home or peace on earth...but if we stay true to that call, and hold to *our* deepest integrity, we *can* find that same peace of *mind*, while we hope and pray and *work* toward it. Amen.