

Sermon for the 22nd Sunday after Trinity
Sermon from SELK Missions Director: Pastor Roger Zieger
Sermon Text: Jeremiah 8:4-7



Have you ever seen a little child learn to walk? A little child that tries to walk a few meters wobbles slightly and uncertainly and it falls over again and again. But the child doesn't stay down for long. With smiles on its face, the child immediately gets back up and continues its strenuous practice. Falling down is not bad but remaining on the ground, not to get up again, is! Falling belongs to growing up, it's a part of it. Even later on, we fall down again and again – figuratively speaking, we can stumble and fall – falling down is part of life. For example, we all know the experiences from our time in school of missed school assignments; a rejected job application; rejection from a partner, the failure of a relationship or even divorce; the loss of friends, work or loved ones? Falling is a part of life, as is standing back up! Falling simply happens – just don't stay down.

Yet there are situations in which people no longer get back up. The Prophet Jeremiah tells us about this in chapter 8 of his book. There, Jeremiah receives a job from God: *"You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord: When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return?"*⁵ *Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit; they refuse to return.*⁶ *I have paid attention and listened, but they have not spoken rightly; no man relents of his evil, saying, 'What have I done?'* *Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle.*⁷ *Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the Lord."*

Jeremiah seems stunned. He asks simple questions that make you want to shout Yes! out loud. When people fall down, don't they get back up like a child? Don't you turn back and ask for directions when you've lost your way and gone astray? But Jeremiah looks at his people, how they fall down and don't get back up, how they go astray and don't turn back. It's so obvious and natural for Jeremiah that when we go astray, we turn back again. He proves this with examples from the animal kingdom. He talks about birds – storks, turtledoves, swallows, and cranes. They all know and obey their inner voices, they follow their migratory paths, and return again and again. But Jeremiah's people? It appears that his people have stopped listening to the inner voice – the natural connection to good and evil, to right and wrong, to the rules of the Lord, the connection to God – these are broken in his people and no longer functions in the individual. People no longer follow what is good, although it should be like an inner voice within them. The individual has stopped searching for God, he has left his path, stumbled, and fallen.

Jeremiah experiences a people who have fallen away and are therefore being punished. For the prophets, Israel was a people that fell away again and again, that fell down and never got back up again. When the laws were violated, when the people strayed from the right faith, when they fell away, then sooner or later the consequences followed – usually in the form of war, defeat, and exile. And today? Isn't it a reoccurring issue? Don't the questions of the prophets catch up with us again? The question is: how are we doing? Are we always on the right path? What about our personal repentance – or falling down and getting back up, like what Jeremiah talked about in his words? Are we living a life according to our inner values, according to our conscience, a life with the commandments and instructions of God?

I think that Jeremiah's experiences are not unfamiliar to us, that we too stumble and fall down from time to time. Stumbling into the snares of complacency and self-righteousness which blinds us to God, our neighbor, and the environment. The prophets remind us to think about if everything really comes from ourselves, if we really are awesome – things we like to believe. Jeremiah reminds us with his speech – with the pictures: the migratory bird flies its course – follows its rules. But the migratory bird doesn't boast about how many thousands of kilometers it has flown, what it all has accomplished, how much he is bursting with strength. To follow the course. For Jeremiah, this could mean following the rules and commandments, to again listen to the inner voice, and to break free from the snares of self-righteousness, to free yourself from this and to include God and your neighbors more in your life again – to put your conscience more in the foreground again.

Falling isn't bad, but remaining on the ground is. Yet getting back up can be infinitely difficult. It requires strength and courage, sometimes more courage than we might think we have. That's why it's important for us to know: when we stumble today, we have Christ on our side, One who doesn't leave us lying on the ground, One who reaches a hand out to us, Who supports us. With God's promise of being close to us, of supporting and understanding us, we can take this path today. Getting up and repenting means looking to Christ and grabbing His hand in prayer, trust, and faith. Falling is not bad – getting up and walking the right path – that's what counts! "Reformation" would be another word for this. With God on our side. Amen!