FIRE IN MY BONES

Jeremiah 20:7-18

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The writer Kathleen Norris once spent a year and a half with the Benedictine monks of St. John‘s Abbey in Minnesota. During her stay she discovered that an important part of monastic life is the continuous reading of entire books of the Bible during morning and evening prayer.

By the end of her sabbatical Norris had heard the entire New Testament and large portions of the old. She writes:

The most remarkable experience of all was plunging into the prophet Jeremiah at morning prayer in late September one year, and staying with him through mid-November. We began with chapter 1, and read straight through, ending at chapter 22:16,. Listening to Jeremiah is one way to get your blood going in the morning; it puts caffeine to shame.

Norris went on to explain how Jeremiah’s sufferings became the agonies of her own soul:

Opening oneself to a prophet as anguished as Jeremiah is painful. On some mornings, I found it impossible. . . . The voice of Jeremiah is compelling, often on an overwhelmingly personal level. One morning, I was so worn out by the emotional roller coaster of chapter 20 that after prayers I walked back to my apartment and went back to bed.

Jeremiah was in circumstances of crushing stress here in ch. 20. It was like a sentence of death, a prolonged nightmare that blighted at least twenty years of his life with physical suffering, and emotional trauma.

So who was to blame? Jeremiah pointed out the human targets of his complaint in frightening detail at v. 10. But behind all human activity lies the mysteriously sovereign hand and watching eye of God. Knowing God was somehow involved raised his distress several notches.

Now, Jeremiah had accused God of letting him down before, at 15:18, in last week’s passage, comparing God to the stream in a wadi that runs dry just when you most need it. Here in ch. 20 he uses a breathtakingly blunt word for what he feels God has done to him and what he himself has let happen.

*You tricked me, Lord, and I let myself be tricked.*

Jeremiah feels that all his suffering (human rejection and ostracism, ridicule and mockery, insult and reproach (vv.7,8)), along with actual physical violence (vv 1,2) amounts to having been in some way cheated or manipulated by God Himself. A fearsome accusation.

Is it that he feels God had somehow lured him into being a prophet, only to discover that it meant a life of hostility and rejection? Or is it that he suddenly thinks that maybe God had, indeed, deceived him into being a *false* prophet, that his words would never come true, and his enemies were right? Such a possibility would shred to pieces his whole identity and vocation.

If that thought did cross his mind, it seems to have been quickly dispelled by his renewed affirmation of *the truth* of the word of God within him – a word he was powerless to silence. Listen again to v. 9:

If I say, “I will not mention him,

or speak any more in his name,”

There is in my heart as it were a burning fire

shut up in my bones,

And I am weary with holding it in,

and I cannot.

He feels trapped as well as tricked. “I can’t win” is exactly the ending of v. 9: [I am weary of holding it in; I can’t win.] That expresses Jeremiah’s sense of quandary, of hopelessness between two impossible alternatives. On the one hand, when Jeremiah speaks the words God gives him, he is faced with violent rejection and opposition from human beings all day long (v. 8). But on the other hand, when he tries to get some relief from such daily trauma by deciding *“I will not mention His word or speak anymore in His name,”* he feels an accumulating agony of compulsion—a compulsion from God Godself – *like a fire shut up in my bones*. “I can’t win!” Jeremiah cries. “If I speak up, they burn me outside. If I keep quiet, God burns me inside.”

He told the people to repent, to seek God’s favor, to turn from idols and the dark practices of pagan cults, only to be denied access to the love of the very people he was trying to save.

In these verses Jeremiah concludes, ‘I will keep quiet. I won’t speak in His name anymore.’ Perhaps he believed that just ignoring God’s urging, or running away from Him, would emancipate him from responsibility to the Word. And lest we become too judgmental of Jeremiah, let us consider how we would respond in his situation. If we were to face a lifetime of suffering because of our God, would we not at least consider just not saying anything anymore?

And history is filled with people who did that—men and women who cracked under the pressure of torture in the first century, or prisoners of the Catholic Inquisitions, or Christian Misos or Chins or Karens from the current Myanmar, people who just had to flee the persecution for their belief in Jesus Christ.

And there’s you and me. We certainly don’t experience the same kind of physical persecution today, but still, this lesson can be seen in the way we handle mockery or embarrassment. Every day we are presented with opportunities to say or do righteous deeds that other people consider peculiar, or even offensive. And if we yield, it results in their dismissal of the Word, and our refusal of it.

So there’s Jeremiah. And Jeremiah felt like fleeing; he cursed the day he was born because God had chosen him from before his birth to be God’s prophet. People, he wanted nothing to do with it. And yet, and yet, there was this compulsion, this burning up inside him of a truth he had to tell out. God’s truth. The truth Judah needed in order to be saved. God needed Jeremiah to tell it out, to be God’s prophet in a time such as that.

It burned within him. He had to love God’s people, by being God’s watchman in Judah, God’s true prophet in the midst of false, pacifying prophets. God needed HIM. And Jeremiah knew it. In the end, Jeremiah had to speak. The divine compulsion is too strong. A prophet’s gotta do what a prophet’s gotta do.

But still you and I need to tremble with him awhile in the fear and pain of v. 10:

For I hear many whispering

Terror is on every side!

‘Denounce him! Let us denounce him!”

Say all my familiar friends,

Watching for my fall.

Perhaps he will be deceived,

Then we can overcome him,

And take our revenge upon him.”

Jeremiah’s life from this point on seems to be one of constant danger. He could expect any minute to be falsely accused, betrayed even by friends, and denounced to hostile political (as in, religious) authorities. Is it at all surprising if his relationship with God oscillated between desperation and hope, between accusation and attentiveness? It’s the gift of scripture that it allows us to see all this humanness in God’s people, even God’s prophets.

Verse 14 of chapter 20:

Cursed be the day on which I was born!

Cursed be the man who brought my

father the news

“A son is born to you,”

Making him very glad.

How can we handle such stridently bitter language? Well, first, there is a similarity here with Job. This kind of language is what comes when you are thrown out on the rubbish heap of life, when all that makes life worth living had been wrenched away from you. It is the voice of intense pain, not theological affirmation. What pray-ers say about God in their screams in the night they may not want integrated into a credal statement, yes? The theology in Jeremiah’s head is given voice in vv 11 through 13 where there is a great—and surprising—singing of praise to the Lord. That’s the theology in Jeremiah’s head. The pain in Jeremiah’s heart is given voice in verses 14-18. The marvel is that the scriptures let us hear both voices.

Jeremiah knew that the word of God within him was the truth that had to be spoken. But he railed against the fact that it had to be HIM who was stuck with the inescapable burden of delivering it.

Why did I come forth from the womb

to see toil and sorrow,

and spend my days in shame? (20:18)

And yet in the middle of all this weeping agony, we did hear verse 13: “Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.” This is such a jarring turn of emotions from agony and resentment to praise, that there are commentators who think this affirmation of v 13 is out of place; that some ancient editor put it here to relieve the tension of Jeremiah vs. God.

However you’ll see this in a lot of laments in the Psalms. It’ll go “O Lord my God, save me from all my pursuers, and deliver me, or like a lion they will tear me apart” -- agony and distress for 17 verses, and then an abrupt change in the 18th: “I will give to the Lord the thanks due to His righteousness, and sing praise to the name of the Lord the Most High.”

Huh? Where’d that come from? Jeremiah here had been in agony before the Lord, and then, out of nowhere it’s “I will sing to the Lord for He has delivered the life of **the** needy from the hands of evildoers.”

What’s happening here? Is it PollyAnna-like, where everything’s gonna turn out right, tra la tra la?

No, thankfully, it’s much more real and true to you and me than that. Or it could be true for you and me. See, it’s much more likely that the change in mood comes from an inner process that you and I can have ourselves.

It is a fact, observed by those who study prayer, that it’s not uncommon for folks who pray to find that feelings of doubt and despair finally do give way to feelings of confidence and assurance.

If you or I want to turn our life around, if, like Jeremiah, or the lamenting psalmists, [if] we anguish, and shake God by the lapels, and wrestle with Him in desperate faith, that faith will open even us up to God’s promise. God’s promise of life and peace and rightness. God’s promise, which we can finally catch a glimpse of. God’s promise, in which we can finally trust. What a relief.

Amen.