

St. Luke's 7A: Jeremiah 20:7-13, Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39

When I was a second grader in a parochial school, I entered the church during recess. Walking through the quiet of the church I was moved to light one candle. And it was beautiful. And if one candle was so beautiful, why not two, and if two, why not three? I lit every candle in the church, rows and rows of candles. St. Philomena's in East Cleveland, Ohio was ablaze. I paid dearly for my indiscretion. The church had a set monetary offering for each candle that was burned. I slowly paid off my debt.

In a dramatic way, the prophet Jeremiah was intoxicated by fire. He too was caught up in its power. Yet Jeremiah knows that fire is more than child's play. Fire is God's presence burning within him. Jeremiah wrestles with how one speaks the word of God. How does one proclaim the fire within? How does one push for justice in a community where not all can hear? Does God use the human speaker to serve as prophet and then abandon him or her to the anger of the crowd? Well, Jeremiah certainly had his doubts about God's motivation. In fact, he had so much doubt that he evaded God's call for over 40 years. "No, no" says Jeremiah. "I'm not the one to tell the people that they are on the wrong track." Yet he does. Perhaps God beat on Jeremiah for so long that he just gave up, tired, exhausted but finally ready to speak.

There are no gentle introductions with Jeremiah; he delivers a bitter speech against Judah and Jerusalem, stating that they have abandoned God; in fact, he predicts their downfall. "Bam. That's it, folks" says Jeremiah. And what is his reward for proclaiming the truth? The scripture passage immediately prior to this morning's reading tells us that he was scourged and thrown in jail.

At this point, Jeremiah rails back at God in the taunting words of our first reading:

"O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed: you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.

This is an angry man. Can you picture Jeremiah with one arm flaying at the heavens, accusing God of the unthinkable? The root translation of the word "enticed" is to be seduced. God used him, overpowered him, and left him as a laughingstock. Jeremiah is alone screaming at God...and yet...after Jeremiah tries to put God in God's place he realizes that he cannot. It is at this point that Jeremiah understands that he cannot evade the fire. In our first

reading, he says, "there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in and I cannot." How does one control a burning fire in the bones? If he loses the fire, if he loses his voice, he has lost his soul. He knows that there is no pain like that of letting the fire go out.

It is difficult to contain fire. It is not static; it moves. Jeremiah knows that if the fire is contained in the bones, turning everything into ash, into dust. He knows that if we pour water on the fire, something inside of us dies. When we insulate ourselves from the pain of the fire, God is not found. God comes to us in the scriptures as a consuming fire that is never consumed, beyond our grasp yet present within us.

If conditions are right, fire ignites that which it touches. It transforms. Jeremiah, when touched with fire, is transformed from someone who hides from God to someone who calls God to task; someone who is not afraid to call on God when all is not well. Fire speaks in the fury.

This fury is known in many cultures, and many stories. In the ancient Celtic tradition, one always knew who was the true hero, the true warrior. The individual would be so filled with longing, energy, power and life, that fire would erupt from the top of the head. It could not be contained in the bones. Cuchulain, an ancient Celtic warrior, could leap over superhuman distances and heights when caught up with his power, caught with fire dancing from his head. In this Pentecost season, we remember the tongues of fire descending on the heads of the apostles. What would it feel like if our tongue turned into fire? We see halos surrounding the heads of the saints. We are embraced with images of those who knew that fire gets into the bones and has to move outward.

And these saints were made on this earth. I do not think it is a coincidence that the earth is the only known place where fire, as we know it on this planet, can leap into existence. Fire did not choose Mars, or the Moon, or Venus, or Jupiter where it cannot physically exist. You can't light a fire on the sun. The scientist, Brian Swimme, claims that the physical process that leads to the sun's light is different from the process of fire on the earth. Wood would not burst into flame near the sun; it would simply disintegrate. Earth fire is unique. We humans may be the only life form that plays with fire. Earth fire, as seen in the halo is the playfulness of God on this earth.

Does all this sound strange? What if God zaps us with a blaze of fire? I

am certain that we can all look around us and say, " God, if you don't mind take him or take her. They would be aesthetically pleasing with a ring of fire around the head but really, not me. My complexion is all wrong, my shirt wouldn't match" ...Jeremiah all over again, saying, "Thank you, but I'd rather not." Is it fear that pulls us back? Fear that the pain of fire may overcome the play, the dance?

Jesus, in this morning's Gospel, says not once, but three times that we need to throw out our fear and get on with it. Jesus gives us a direct command, "Do not be afraid." He acknowledges that evil has power, that his disciples will be maligned, that death is real. He does not promise to put out the pain associated with fire but he does promise to release us from fear: fear that stifles, dampens, and conforms.

Nature teaches us wonderful lessons about moving beyond fear. I was caught in the awesome fire in Yellowstone National Park. My father and I travelled to the park and found that bits and pieces of the park were igniting in flame. Yet we looked at each other and decided that we would stay. All went well until about two o'clock at night when a forest ranger knocked on the door and stated that the fire was heading toward the cabin and we needed to leave. My father, moving a bit too quickly, fell and broke his leg in several places. And we could see the fire in the distance. The ranger told me that I would have to drive to the nearest hospital and, yes, the road would follow the fire.

The fire followed us for miles, leaping as a solid wall beside the road. It was beautiful; the fire illuminated the darkness. Along the road, hundreds of deer, buffalo, and elk stood, gazing intently into the fire. They stood as sentinels, watching, waiting. And then all of the animals and my father and I moved together. I did not feel fear.

I think that this is what Jesus means when he says in today's gospel, "Have no fear ...for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." Fire illuminates; it helps us moves through all obstacles. It casts us out of the darkness. Jesus says that what he speaks to us in the dark, must be told in the light.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks in the open; he speaks with anger, not fear. Anger can move us forward; fear pulls us in. Anger is part of the prophetic role and, for Jeremiah, it is a gift. It moves him to know truth more clearly.

We are not all called to speak before the powers of this world but there

are issues that God is asking us to name and claim as our own. In what areas are you grappling with God? What is the fire in your bones that needs to be released? Jesus does not say that everything will turn out the way we want but that we need to speak.

There is a story from one of the Fathers of the Egyptian desert. Abba Lot was striving, yearning to know God. Lot came to his spiritual father, Joseph, and said, "Father, according to my strength, I pray, I fast, I try to cleanse my thoughts. Now what more can I do?"

Abba Joseph stood up and spread out his hands toward heaven, and his fingers were like ten lamps of fire. And he said, "If you want, why not become totally fire?"

Today's readings do not promise an end to suffering. But they do say that when we speak and live with fire, God is present.

Fire in the bones must be called from the dark, proclaimed from the housetops. Fear not.

Fire is God's own life.

Why not become fire?