

“Within me there is something like a burning fire”

The Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Missioner for Creation Care

What would it be like to be so fired with a vision of God’s justice and mercy that you just couldn’t help but speak about it? What if your experience of God was so vivid and so visceral that you couldn’t contain it, couldn’t keep it to yourself, but you had to express it, had to share it, had to bring it forth into the world? Apparently that’s what happened to Jeremiah 1500 years ago, for he sounds like a man so possessed by God, so gripped by God’s presence, that he actually feels compelled to speak. “If I say ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (Jeremiah 20:9).

Jeremiah seems unable to express anything but the deepest truth he knows. He is not one to go along and get along. He is not one to accept the lie that injustice doesn’t matter or that cruelty is acceptable. He can’t help but see that his country is running after false gods. He can’t help but see that his country’s policies are creating violence and destruction. Forget any governmental or corporate campaign of disinformation – Jeremiah would see right through it. He’s a man who can’t help but stand up again and again, speaking out day after day for God’s justice, mercy, and truth.

Obviously this is not a comfortable place in which to live. Jeremiah is by turns ignored, taunted, and persecuted. He tells us that he has “become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks (him)” (Jeremiah 20:7).

Like the prophets before him, Jesus also faced conflict and opposition. So, too, will those who follow him. “A disciple,” says Jesus, “is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master” (Matthew 10:24). Just as Jesus was contemptuously derided as Beelzebul, an Aramaic name for Satan, so too will his followers be insulted, misrepresented, persecuted – and worse – even when our message is one of authentic love.

What do we make of this? What might the Spirit be saying to us in these unsettling words of Scripture?

First: Protect the fire in your bones. Hold fast to your perception of a God who loves mercy and creates justice and speaks truth. Trust your longing for a society that makes room for everyone – for the lonely, the left out, and the lost, for the poor and the marginalized. God planted this longing in you. The world needs people of fire, people who are not afraid to listen deeply to God and then to articulate as clearly and persuasively as we can – and to embody and bring into being as effectively as we can – God’s dream of a world that is marked by justice rather than oppression, by inclusion rather than division, by truthfulness rather than lies.

Second: Expect opposition. Don’t be surprised if your efforts are met by rejection or contempt. Giving voice to the needs of the poor, of racial and ethnic minorities, of the powerless and the forgotten, of our other-than-human kin, will very likely provoke friction with the powers that be. Speaking up for social justice or for protecting God’s green earth can provoke scorn, or worse, so don’t be surprised. That’s the way of the world.

Third: Don't be afraid. Time and again Jesus tells us, "Have no fear." "Do not fear," he says. And again, "Do not be afraid." Why not? Because we are loved by God. Because we belong to a God who knows and loves us, through and through. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29-30).

Listen to that voice of love, the voice we hear in Scripture and in the quiet of our own hearts. Especially now, in a time of anxiety, violence, and uncertainty, we need the willingness, the *discipline*, to listen to that voice of love, not to the voices of bitterness and hate. The inner voice of love may be very quiet and subtle, and in prayer we listen for it attentively and patiently.

"I have called you by name," God says to us in the secret center of the self. "I have redeemed you. I will not forget you. I have carved you in the palm of my hand. I know your sitting down and your rising up. I am acquainted with all your ways. I have loved you since before time began. I give myself to you in every Eucharist, and I will be with you every step of the way until I welcome you home at your journey's end. With me, you can face whatever comes with your head held high. Do not be afraid."

That is the bedrock of our faith, the sure foundation of God's loving-kindness. Touch that bedrock, and you know you are safe. Touch that bedrock, and you feel God's passion for a world in which beauty is defined as creating the conditions in which life can flourish. Touch that bedrock, and you know in your bones that God longs not for hatred and revenge, not for privilege for the few and deprivation for the many, but for a world marked by compassion and justice.

Like Jeremiah, we may grow weary, but if the wind of God is blowing through us, if the breath of the Spirit is animating our efforts, we can take heart. We are exactly where we are called to be. Sure, it's a risky business, listening to the voice of love and bearing witness to that love in the world. Bearing God's word can be a painful path: it is the way of the Cross. But it is also a path of joy, for it is what we were made for. We were created to love and to be loved, created to take part in God's project of reconciliation.

How are you being called right now to share in God's mission of mercy, justice, and compassion?

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