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“Fire Blazing in the Heart”

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22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Jeremiah 20:7-9; Psalm 63:1-8; Matthew 16:21-28

The prophets Jeremiah and Jesus both had “God-fire” in their hearts, a fire that was a flame burning, blazing.

For those of you unfamiliar with the story of Jeremiah, let me refresh your memories. This particular text comes from what is commonly called the “Confessions” of Jeremiah. This is one of the few occasions in all the corpus of the prophetic writings where you have a very personal expression of the prophet’s anguish about being entrusted with the role of being a prophet. If you recall, at the very beginning of Jeremiah’s call to ministry as prophet, the Lord said, “I formed you in the womb before I knew you. I appointed you to be prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah’s response was, “Lord, look. I don’t know how to speak. I’m only a boy!” And the Lord God says, “Don’t be afraid. I am with you to deliver you.” (cf. Jeremiah 1:5-8)

But his experience of being a faithful prophet of God was otherwise. You heard it read: “I’ve become a laughingstock all day long. Everyone mocks me. I feel as if, in fulfilling my role as prophet of God, that you deceived me, that you duped me, that you enticed me, that you seduced me, you overpowered me, you overwhelmed me, and that’s why you prevailed.” It’s almost as if he is saying he accepted this call under false pretences.

It had three implications for the prophet: First of all, the message he was entrusted

to deliver was a message of doom and gloom. “I must shout violence and destruction,” he said. Not a good message to win over many friends.

Secondly, because he had to preach that message, he had become a laughingstock, a mocked one among the people. “This is my people, and yet I must preach this word, and I get in return mockery, derision, reproach? I’m a laughingstock!”

Finally, he understands that in the midst of all this, he had not received any comfort from God. That is the hardest part of all. He was promised deliverance; he was promised God be “with you,” and though he preached a hard message, and accepted the derision and the reproach, he received no comfort.

In the midst of all this anguish, he was at the point of saying, “I give up! I will not even mention God’s name! I will not speak anymore in his name!” Then he remembered that within him, there was something like a burning fire, shut up, imprisoned in his bones, and he’s weary “of holding it in,” and he cannot. And he continues on, being a faithful prophet of the living God.

I think the story of Jeremiah is a good illustration of what’s going on in the mission entrusted to Jesus. Here is a little context: last week in the Lectionary readings, you had Jesus ask his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” We know the response: some say this, some say that, and then finally, Peter, the spokesman for the band of Jesus’ disciples, says, “You are the Messiah. You are the Son of the Living God.” Jesus says, “Yes, Peter. You are correct,” and he entrusts him with the keys of the kingdom.

In the very next episode, Jesus says to his disciples, “I *must* go to Jerusalem!” Jerusalem was the center of political and religious life. It was necessary for Jesus, in his bold preaching of the coming of the kingdom, to go there. This was not a suicide mission, yet he knew that if he went there, because of his claim of forgiveness of sin, of his wonder working, of his preaching of the kingdom, that he was going to receive opposition and resistance and even the possibility of death. He knew that. “I must go to Jerusalem.”

We can think of other inspirational leaders who had that same sense of compulsion

or fire in their hearts that led to their deaths. Dr. Martin Luther King in walking the streets of Memphis knew that assassination was a possibility. Archbishop Óscar Romero in El Salvador was another who spoke truth to the power, disturbed them; he also was cut down by an assassination bullet when he was celebrating the Eucharist.

You can think of many others where the “must” is at the heart of their compulsion to be faithful no matter what. And yet, in the face of this, Peter takes him aside and says to Jesus, “Good Lord, this is impossible. God forbid it. This must never happen to you.” This is the very same Peter who said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus turned to him and said, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. You don’t understand the nature of my mission and my role. I am not a triumphant liberator of the people of Israel. I am a suffering servant. My role is defined by the suffering servant songs of Isaiah. So get behind me and try to understand fully the mission and ministry that had been entrusted to me in my life.”

In the following separate but related episode, Jesus then goes on to teach them something about following him, about taking up the cross. Jesus wasn’t directly referring to his death by the cross because the cross was a very poignant symbol in his time because it was the execution method for slaves and traitors. It became symbolic of bearing the burden of suffering.

We have heard this message before, and it is important for us to get in touch with our own fire in our hearts to make sure that it is alive and the flame is blazing as we as a community and as individuals keep on extending the mission and ministry of Jesus in our community and in our lives.

I’ve always been proud as a witness to the accomplishments of this community as it bears the cross of being the voice of justice in Durham. Our Mission Study Committee has captured some of that ongoing commitment over the years, and all of us are pleased with our connection with that voice of justice that defines who we are as a community of faith.

We also know the ways in which bearing the cross is part of what it means to be a

good parent. For those of you who are parents of teenagers, you know that despite the unconditional love that we offer them, they face challenges as they are consistently tempted in this world of permissiveness to ignore that kind of moral virtue that is part of who they are called to be. So often, the key to the kingdom for our teenagers in our culture is all about the self. I am pleased with the work of *Sarah Finbow* in her ministry with our young people to make sure that the kingdom of self does not reign above the Kingdom of God.

So I encourage you, as part of hearing the Word today, to stay the course of discipleship despite all the setbacks, disasters, difficulties, frustrations, and anguish in your life, and even the spiritual slumps into which we fall. I just ask you to stay the course because God is afire, ablaze, alive, living, aflame in your hearts, too. Listen once again to the words of Jeremiah and be true as you hear it to the conviction and truth that comes from God's kingdom.

“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).

Despite his complaints and his anguish, this is a fire to which he, and you and I, must be true.