

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Luke 12:49-56

Some heavy duty readings today, aren't they? First the prophet Jeremiah warning Israel that the judgment of the LORD is "like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces." Then Jesus, too, talking about coming to bring fire to the earth and wishing it were already kindled. "I have a baptism with which to be baptized," he says, "and what stress I am under until it is completed!"; seeming so pushed to his limit of patience with the world that he can hardly wait to get to Jerusalem, where he knows he will be killed! Or at least that's the way the story reads on its face; the way it can feel to us when we're vulnerable and desperate and looking, as the disciples surely were, for a place of safety and sureness, where we are comforted by the One who loves us. This other, this uncompromising, even angry Jesus, feels more—well, Old Testament, rather than New.

Yet it's unnerving, the way both passages seem to reflect what's been going on in the world around us for the past week. Just when some had dared to hope that the worst was over in the financial situation, we looked up in shock to find that, once again, our desire for security had gotten the better of our grip on reality. Just as in the economically and politically unsettled times that Jeremiah describes, there are plenty of false prophets today, claiming to speak in the name of God or of the stock market: visionaries and would-be visionaries claiming, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" Who, then, should we believe? Who can we trust? We've gone over it and over it until our heads ache, financial "experts" and ordinary people alike, and we still can't figure it out and maybe never will: what happened exactly, when the ground began to move beneath our feet two years ago, and who's to blame. So, as the future appears to darken, perhaps for the whole world, we come here, to church, to hear the Good News of the gospel, and here's Jesus, lashing out at us and saying that we don't get it at all! That if we thought he'd come to bring peace to the earth, we were dead wrong; that he's come to bring not peace, but division—and right down to the places where we feel it most. How can that be good news?

And yet it is; and if we travel with him and the disciples we begin, perhaps, to understand. For as Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem, he becomes a source of conflict and opposition, doing and saying all the things he does; laying claim to startling forms of authority and power, his words

marked with a growing apocalyptic urgency and intensity. The road to Jerusalem, after all, leads to a violent confrontation, and to the cross. No wonder his experience of life comes to be one of “consuming fire.”

Yet, just as the ground blackened by a roaring forest fire releases the life in millions of seeds that needed that searing heat to bring them to germination, so it may be that we are released by a kind of necessary, inevitable suffering—not *willed* by God, but *used* by God to bring us into new life that could not have existed without it.

I read recently about a woman called Lisa Fithian, who is a grass-roots peace activist in this country. She has been arrested 30 times for intentionally creating crises, situations that force the powers that be—the media, consumers, corporations, the military—to critically examine and then change their policies. She says, “When people ask me, ‘What do you do?’ I say, *I create crisis*, because crisis is that edge where change is possible.” Reading her words, I asked myself, “Could that be what Jesus meant when he talked about bringing fire to the earth? We may nurture and develop our inner lives, our spiritual selves, as much as we like—which as many of you know I believe is a deeply important thing to do—but there are times, too—many times, in my experience—when the only thing that’ll work is some kind of external force or crisis to break into us, to stir us up to the depths of our being, to turn us upside down and rightside up again and put us back together differently, like one of those Picasso portraits with two noses on the same side of a face. Something, some force to *open us* to the right path, so that we can’t mistake it for anything else, at those times when we know what we ought to do but simply lack the moral courage or will to do it.

You’ll understand that this is an issue for me when I read you the first lines of my favorite poem, written in the seventeenth century by one among that “cloud of witnesses” we heard about earlier, who surround us and beckon to us and walk ahead of us to light the way. This is the great, passionate prayer of John Donne:

Batter my heart, three person’d God, for you
 As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
 That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow mee, and bend
 Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me
 new.

Like you, perhaps, I have had reason in my personal life to be aware of this necessity for a purifying force to change me, something stronger than my own human will and intelligence. With some help from friends and a lot of prayer, I have begun the process of being broken down, even hammered, past all my usual defenses (which a lifetime of construction and upkeep have made very strong) to a place where—it's hard to describe it...I feel that my hearing has been restored and my sight renewed. Like the disciples, I am not only able to read the signs of a change in the weather, but am better able to interpret the present moment—the *kairos* moment, the moment of opportunity which will never come again--in the way I *think* that Jesus meant. I wish it had been possible to get to this new place by an easier route, but apparently it wasn't. Our cherished dreams and illusions, like those of the false prophets in Jeremiah's time and ours, can be very powerful, very hard to break. Sometimes we need to be awakened from them not with soft music or a snooze bar, but with an ear-piercing alarm that brings us to our feet with our hearts pounding. Sometimes pain is the only thing that will do it. Sometimes that's how deeply we have been asleep.

Might it be possible for us to arrive at the new places in our lives in a more gradual, organic way, with less damage to ourselves and others? I used to think so—I thought I'd done it!—but now I don't know. I doubt it. The history of humanity is not exactly a study of easy learners.

Cynthia Bourgeault, one of our more perceptive spiritual writers, calls this necessary pain *constriction*—bumping up against the hard edges of life--and believes that it is not punishment, but a sacrament: something that reveals a mystery in a particularly intense way, while at the same time offering a way for that mystery to be made actual. And having come to that, she goes on to wonder, “Did Jesus have to experience the human life he did, filled with betrayal and abandonment and homelessness and death? Couldn't he have gotten his message across through an easier career path? say, chief priest or political leader or the Messiah people expected him to be? From any of these launching pads,” she reflects, “he would have been well positioned to ‘put his teachings out there’ and impact the consciousness of his times in really a significant way. But none of these opportunities materialized. Why not?” Cynthia Bourgeault asks. *Because the path he did walk is precisely the one that would most fully unleash the transformative power of his teaching.*” In other words, because it was the best and only way to model the “one thing necessary” here, which is “to die to self...to grow beyond the survival instincts of the animal brain and the [operating system

of the ego]” into the self-emptying joy and generosity we see Jesus modeling in *most* of the gospel stories. The breaking and entering doesn’t have to go on *all* the time.

And if that’s the case; if the good news can only come after the bad news has broken through, then no matter how alluring the dream may have seemed while we were lost in it—the dream of uninterrupted prosperity, of frictionless family relationships; watching the future roll out in front of us at the top of the curve, as if no bottoms existed—it’s still better to be awake. Still better to live in *kairos* time, one foot here and one foot in eternity.

And who knows? in the end, it may very well be that the new landscape in which we find ourselves, that burnt-over ground coming to life again at the other end of our difficult journey, turns out to be a place we recognize: the place where, in innocence, we first began. So the God who spoke through Jeremiah mends the rock that he has broken into pieces and makes it stronger. So God, in Christ, brings us home.

The Rev. Betsy Payne Rosen
Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley
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