

The Secret of Survival

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Matthew 6:1-8

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In chapter 19, Jeremiah declares that “this people” and “this city” are like a broken pot that cannot be mended. When he announced this devastating verdict upon the Jerusalem establishment, he predictably evoked harsh response. In chapter 20, Pashur, a high sacral bureaucrat who in this chapter enjoys his fifteen minutes of fame, arrested Jeremiah as an enemy of the state. He punished him by putting him in stocks “in the Upper Benjamin Gate” of the temple. This caused Jeremiah in turn to unleash a strong invective against the official and against all Judah, all the wealth of the city, all its profits, all its prized belongings, and all its treasures. He asserted that all was under immediate threat by the harsh judgment of God.

That abrasive exchange brings us to our text in chapter 20. I settled on this sequence because in the company of pastors and priests—it could be any of us—we all know about saying a word and being labeled an enemy of all that is treasured, if not arrested then isolated, if not publicly scored, then at least a subject of many monstrous rumors, much gossip, and cancelled pledges. And all because one is boldly faithful, reasonably faithful in the service of one’s call, but perceived by others as an enemy of all that is precious.

This sermon is only for those among us who find yourselves in conflict, under assault, in deep tension for the practice of faith. It is for you, even if you have not been publicly humiliated with stocks in the public square. But it is only for those few among us in such dispute. Others of you may listen or leave, but it is not for you.

The narrative sequence of prophetic declaration, arrest, and invective intensified the dispute in Jerusalem and caused the zealous prophet to sink into deep turmoil and doubt, leaving us with questions: What should happen next in the text? What word should come next in the text? Well, the editors of the book of Jeremiah have decided what comes next, and it strikes me as a good decision. After the harsh public exchange, the break from the narrative in 20:6 to the poem in 20:7 is an abrupt move from public dispute to Jeremiah at prayer. It is in prayer that this man of deep dispute finds sustenance for his life and his ministry; he finds sustenance, however, only by continued dispute, this time in secret. Only this time it is dispute with the God who has called him into this unbearable ministry in the first place.

I have always read Jesus’ injunction to us in the Sermon on the Mount as an imperative to privacy, in order to avoid high phrases and ostentatious spirituality. Maybe that is what Jesus intends. He said, as you know:

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. (Matt. 6:6-7)

When the teaching of Jesus on prayer is connected to the crisis of Jeremiah, however, a different thought occurs to me. Maybe the reason for prayer in secret, rather than the danger of public display, is that Jeremiah is about to get down and dirty with the God who calls him. Jeremiah must pray in secret, not because to pray in public is a temptation to ostentatiousness as much as it is that such prayer in public would be a scandal to both prophet and God, for things must be said that are not for the curious, censorious ears of Pashur. Jesus says do it in secret:

Go to your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

This is the one from whom no secret can be hid!

But the secret that cannot be hid from the Father is not that one has a big wish list to speak to the hearer of our prayers. Nor is the secret that Jeremiah has deep sins about which God already knows. Not petition and not confession, but simply the transaction of genuine, honest dialogue with no holds barred, a dialogue upon which life depends and upon which ministry must be premised. I propose that it is this secret exchange with no holds barred that is the secret of survival for this Jeremiah whose very survival is at risk because of the accusatory onslaught of the establishment. My thought in this sermon is a simple one: the public ministry of Jeremiah 20:1-6 (including his arrest and humiliation) is juxtaposed to the prayer of 20:7-13 because it is *secret prayer* that permits energy, freedom, and courage for *public ministry*.

The servants who faithfully show God to the world are those who live in deep, disputatious conversation with God. I think this is worth talking about because I believe faithful ministry in time to come will be increasingly a contested practice that will test our faith and require both every resource we can muster and every resource that God will give us. The ultimate resource for ministry, I propose, is honest conversation with God through which God is drawn, deep and thick, into the needfulness of our ministry. So consider this prayer that rendered Jeremiah bold and fearless in public places.

The prayer begins in truth-telling against God, *a bold accusation* that borders on paranoia:

O Lord, you have enticed me,
and I was enticed;
You have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughing stock all day long;
everyone mocks me. (v. 7)

Strong language this. The God who called the prophet is a trickster who has lured into vocation under false pretenses. Along with wile, this calling God has coerced and forced, and left the prophet with no alternative. Jeremiah had protested against the call at the outset, but God would not be persuaded otherwise. As a result, Jeremiah is forced to become this voice that warns, accuses, exposes, and undermines in Jerusalem. He had said, in his vivid imagery, that his society is on the way to death by its foolish choices that lead to foolish, God-defying policies. That is all that he had said; but he

had to say it.

The vocation is too hard. But it turns out that the prophet has only two choices:

For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, "Violence and derision!"
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
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.
for I hear many whispering:
"Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"
All my close friends are watching for me to stumble.
"Perhaps he can be enticed,
and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him." (vv. 8-10)

Two choices: he can *speak*, and that leads to all kinds of hostility and alienation, rejection by close friends, rejection on every side; or he can *be silent*, and then the stuff burns on the inside. Either speech or silence. Either way unbearable, all because of the seductive God of Israel who has forced him into an impossible vocation. Better not to have been called; better not to notice or to care. But now all those options are gone; the poet has run out of options. The God who promised to support him is no support at all; that God is fickle and now must listen to this assault of prayer...all in secret, no holds barred, down and dirty. The prayer is in secret, the text is unsuspected by his contemporaries, the intensity is unrecognized, all necessary to survival, but in secret.

But then a reversal of sentiment. In public one must be consistent, coherent, measured. In secret, however, one can be as self-contradictory and herky-jerky as one's teeming, self-contradictory emotions require. This God accused is *the God to be trusted*, because the prophet is innocent, has kept his call, and so counts completely upon this harsh God to be ally and guardian:

But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble,
and they will not prevail.
They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten.
O Lord, of hosts, you test the righteous,
you see the heart and the mind:
Let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause. (vv. 11-12)

This God is still ferocious, still powerful, still overriding; only now as Jeremiah's ally. This is the God who prevailed over Jeremiah. And now Jeremiah is utterly certain that none of his enemies can prevail, precisely because God is dread warrior who will withstand every onslaught. For a moment God was enemy, in that moment when all were enemy. But when Jeremiah remembers clearly that his enemy is Pashur, that sacral bureaucrat and the men of Anathoth, he is able to acknowledge God, in his desperate prayer, as a friend and ally.

God is trustworthy, strong but not fickle. This is the very God to whom prayers can be reliably made, not a nice God, not a therapeutic God, not a warm fuzzy, not a dear uncle, but God of hosts, God with hard capacities and stern resolves. Jeremiah prays to and trusts this God, because he himself cannot withstand his persecutors, and he will not appeal to a God who is kind but helpless.

So in secret he prays to this God,

who will do for him what he cannot do for himself,
who will prevail for him against every enemy threat,
who will remember the shame of the adversary,
who will work retaliation upon the enemy.

This *desperate man* has become this *confident man* through this secret negotiation in which the truth is told. Jeremiah had not needed to be polite or consistent, and now does not need to be modest or gentle. It is in secret and so he can move to the deepest extremity of confidence, a confidence adequate even for his desperate social context.

Accusation turns to *confidence*. And now in verse 13 *confidence* turns to glad, yielding *praise*:

Sing to the lord;
praise the Lord!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hands of the evildoers.

What a voice! Who would have thought in verse 7 that Jeremiah would get to that cadence of doxology! No doubt he is still surrounded by evildoers like Pashur who would like to put him permanently in stocks...or worse. No doubt he will soon have to go back into the fray, out beyond his closet of secret prayer, for that is his calling and he cannot duck it. He now does not want to duck it; he now knows that if he ducks it he will get acute heartburn "like a burning fire shut up in my bones." Still the same role, still the same adversaries, but new in God, now assured yet again that the God who calls is the God who delivers all the needy, but particularly delivers this needy prophet who has no other resource.

The dramatic turn in this verse is astonishing. How did Jeremiah make that move? Well, perhaps God came to him somewhere in the midst of this poem, reiterating the assurance, "I am with you." Such dramatic reentry by God, however, is only possible for the public prophet who practices a second, hidden life of faith. In that hidden life of faith, the prophet is not advocate, not shrill moralist, not cocksure about the great public issues, but rather is down and dirty, down and dirty enough to learn again that the God who calls and lures and avenges is not the God of social action or covenantal

Torah or righteous indignation, but is the down and dirty God with whom talk must be daring, who must be assaulted and challenged and resisted and defied...and eventually praised. So this text and this sermon are for pastors for whom life is unbearable in stress and tension. The text is an assertion that for all the coping techniques of stress management and time management and support groups—all-important in themselves—that in the end the issue is an intimate theological one. There must be deep *freedom in secret* with the holy, calling God in order that there be *deep courage in public ministry*. Without such secret, the public practice becomes one of cynicism or accommodation or a dozen other forms of fickleness.

I must be honest enough to tell you that if you read past verse 13 into verses 14-18, the prophet immediately falls out of doxology into what sounds like despair and depression. It would be better if doxology were the final word and the chapter ended in verse 13. But of course doxology never is the final word. After doxology there is always the deep reality of intransigence that talks us out of praise and into self-pity. Of course. That reality is known to every person called of this God.

Clearly, however, the depth of verses 14-18 is also not final. Jeremiah moves past that as well. For he is soon back after that again into fierce confrontation about the truth that must be told. He moves past despair because he now has resources. He has the God who calls him, the promise of presence, and the chance to go back to verse 7 and say it all again, always again, and arriving always again at a moment of doxology. What we know in ministry is that we never arrive. We just stay at it and do it again. We do it again in public. But we do it in public because we do it in secret. We move back and forth. We survive...just barely...but we survive.

There was good reason for Jesus to say what he did about prayer. Prayer in public is too polite for those who find themselves in deep vocations. We may find the shrewdness of Jesus seconded by the poetic imagination of John Donne. He offers as a prayer:

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, O'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to'another due,
labor to admit You, But O, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captive, and proves weak or untrue.
yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me. (Sonnet 14)

The very God who puts us in harm's way is the one to whom we turn in deepest intimacy, there in servitude to be set free, there to be healed, healed and imprisoned, drawn to rage and resentment, seeking for revenge, rising to praise, all moments of real life given us in secret with our secret enemy become the one who loves us most deeply

and most dearly.

The news is that *survival is a secret art*. It depends upon renderings that are honest, conflicted, ragged, and lyrical. We are offered such a secret of survival, and then back to the public place. We go there on behalf of the God who promised at the outset:

But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the lord, to deliver you. (Jer. 1:17-19)

Jeremiah can remember that initial assurance and prays it back to God confidence:

But the Lord God is with me like a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble,
and they will not prevail. (20:11)

Praise will not last, cannot last. But it is a treasured moment, a nervy assertion. Jeremiah gives thanks for life given again:

Sing praise to the Lord;
praise the lord!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hands of the evildoers. (20:13)

His prayer is part of the larger prayer of hope that the church and all its pastors sing in the face of evil:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our lord
and of his Messiah,
and he will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 11:15)

Secret survival, public ministry, large hope, sure promise, and all the while truth-telling...enough to keep going, again and again, and going and going and going.