

The Prophet's Flame

Jeremiah 20:7-13

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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. Jeremiah 20:9

In 1967, when I was in the fifth grade, I had a stern, no-nonsense teacher by the name of Mildred Chaffin. In 1967 you could still paddle and also preach in class, and she did a bit of both. Mrs. Chaffin was a fearful woman. She had glaring biblical eyes, and you could not directly look at her for very long and expect to live. I rarely spoke in class that year for fear of offending her. I was a good boy—a class monitor at times.

You know what a class monitor is. "Now class," she would say, "I have to step down the hall for just a moment. I'll only be gone a second to pick up the film projector and I know you'll be on your best behavior. I know you can be good while I'm away. But just in case, I've asked Frank to take names for me while I'm gone." Of course the role of class monitor was a mixed honor. You were chosen because the teacher liked you, which was good. But the other kids hated your guts for it, which was bad. Many class monitors I know now have deep psychological problems as adults.

I ignored most behavior in my tenure as monitor. It was the only safe thing to do—I just kept my eyes on my own paper and prayed that the time passed quickly. One day, though, when Mrs. Chaffin was out, Kenny Smallen did something that was difficult to ignore. Kenny left his seat and ran repeatedly, back and forth, to the blackboard. He would write a curse word plainly on the board and then pronounce it for the class (in case we had any doubts), erasing the evidence each time. It only took a second, each gallop to the board; it was hard for a monitor to ignore this. I remember Kenny's crass words quite plainly, a rather salty display for ten-year olds.

Well, Mrs. Chaffin returned, somebody spilled the beans, and she summoned her class monitor out into the hall. I knew what was coming. I knew that she would never let go of this in a million years. Not her—she was a stern woman, a hard-shell Baptist. This would not go unpunished. "I want to know those words, Frank," she said. "You can tell me. It's okay. You can even write them down here on this piece of paper." We were out there for what seemed like forever. I remember looking up at her in total terror, ready to wet my pants over the moral dilemma. Kenny Smallen was in danger of losing his life. And mine too was over, you see, as she looked down at me in that hallway in 1967. It was either face her or Kenny's fists. Not a happy choice for a fifth grader more than ready to resign as class monitor.

In the year 627 B.C.E., over twenty-five hundred years before I was a fifth grader, God called Jeremiah to be a prophet. I love his response in the first chapter of the book that bears his name: "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Some scholars think Jeremiah really was quite young, that he's not exaggerating, maybe even a teenager, which would explain his hesitancy. For who wants to be a messenger of God not only to your peers who know you and would laugh, but also to your elders who would never take you seriously?

You can almost hear Jeremiah's breath exhale as he reacts to God's call. "Ohhhhh. Ahhhh Gawd. Ohhh my." I suspect you've released such honest pastoral mutterings before walking into a situation where the truth needed to be told. "Ohhh God." Later on Jeremiah will be thrown into a cistern (37:16). He will be told to hide his underwear under a rock (13:4). He'll get into a big fight with a bogus prophet in the middle of public worship, a skirmish that could easily make it onto the Jerry Springer show (28:10). And just before our lesson appointed for tonight,¹ Jeremiah is slapped into stocks for prophetic impertinence (20:2). Perhaps Jeremiah sees some of what's up ahead in the first chapter when he's called and doesn't want to do it—doesn't want to be a prophet. His daddy was a priest, and he'd already seen what life in the parsonage was like. And so our hero balks at becoming a classroom monitor for God's wayward people, and who can really blame him?

In one of his radio monologues, Garrison Keillor wryly notes, "People *hurt* prophets. They throw sharp things at them. They rip their clothes off 'em and make them sit for long periods of time in uncomfortable positions on top of sharp objects that are extremely flammable. That's what they do to prophets. I don't want that," he says. "I don't want any pain whatsoever. Minor dentistry is more than enough for me."

It's a dangerous, draining thing to be a prophet—to tell the truth for God. Who would sign up for such a thing? "O Lord," laments Jeremiah in tonight's lesson, "you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed." Old Testament scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel emphasizes that the Hebrew rendering of Jeremiah's lament is even stronger than that. Literally, the verse should read: "Lord, you have *seduced* me and I am seduced; you have *raped* me and I am overcome." Jeremiah's accurate, if harsh, perception is that his life is not his own.

I remember my first days after arriving at Ebenezer in Columbia. The Property Committee chair took me on a detailed tour of the place. I was grateful for the tour. The building has twenty-six bathrooms and is dripping in South Carolina Lutheran history. After twenty years in rural and small town ministry, I still get turned around in the city. Heck, I still get turned around on the church's basement floor. What I remember most about that tour was a lingering stop at the picture gallery of pastors and the revealing editorial comments offered by my guide. "Now we *really* liked him," I was told. His eyes went from the picture and then back to me several times to make sure I'd noted the name—an invitation, no doubt, to investigate the church history and *why* they'd liked him; a tenure worthy of clerical duplication. Silence, of course, spoke volumes about other pictures.

It's hard to be a prophet, to try and tell the truth; it's far easier not to rock the boat. It's tempting to get caught up in developing a reputation, succumbing to a huge pastoral siren call: *being liked*. Jesus names this temptation as well as anyone in Luke's Sermon on the Plain: "Woe to those of whom all speak well" (6:26). If *everyone* likes what you're doing, it's fairly safe to say that you aren't doing your job.

Wrote the great preacher C.H. Spurgeon in the nineteenth century: "I have tried, especially of late, to take no more notice of man's praise than of his blame."² It's an enviable place from which to do our pastoral work. We would do well to forever remember the words of Balaam, who came to his senses after being confronted by a talking ass and sword-wielding angel in the Book of Numbers: "Do I have the power to say just anything?" Balaam asks of those who want him to speak in partisan fashion. "The word God puts in my mouth, *that* is what I must say" (22:38).

I suspect that part of what is going on in this lesson tonight is that Jeremiah, like any of us, wants to be liked; he just wants to fit in and shut-up, riding out his time until retirement. It's not so hard. Smile, do the weddings, splash some water, say nice eulogistic things at funerals. Thirty or forty years will pass before you know it. God's word, says our lesson, can be a "reproach and derision all day long" and who in the world needs that? Far easier, maybe even healthier, to remain quiet.

Or is it?

"If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak anymore 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." Such is the life of a prophet.

Be bold to pray even with the jaded sassiness of Jeremiah. But also pray that you might be given the courage to say what really needs to be said around your place of mission, not worrying so much about churchy manners or being "nice" all the time.

For all of us, in truth, are like that little boy stuck out in his fifth-grade hallway, forever torn between allegiances.

And what shall we say in Jesus' name?

Notes

1. This sermon was preached in October 2005 at the annual gathering of the Virginia Synod Ministerium (ELCA) in Natural Bridge, Virginia.
2. I am indebted to Will Willimon for this Spurgeon quote in his book, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).