

Sunday, June 22, 2014: Jeremiah 20:7-13; Matthew 10:24-39

## **Jeremiah has great resolve—at least in retrospect.**

by [Jennifer E. Copeland](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue

Fire in the bones. It's a great metaphor for the passion of our youth, used to explain an unquenchable desire to give our lives to full-time ministry. Credentialing bodies were thrilled to hear our call stories, especially when we peppered them with scriptural references. These verses from Jeremiah offered solid punctuation to our naive declarations.

A few years into church work, we found ourselves tending to decisions about the carpet color for the church parlor or the appropriate chaperone-to-youth ratio for the upcoming ski trip. Worthy matters, but they lack the gravitas of Jeremiah's encounters. Oh, to have adjudications that might get us thrown in a well!

And here is the great anachronism that haunts much of our reading of scripture. From this side of history, it seems that Jeremiah has great clarity and resolve. Yet the shifting political allegiances he struggles to interpret are not so different from our own uncertainties about the world. The dilemmas faced by those who gather to hear arguments and pass judgment on the law of the Judean land are echoed in congressional debates about farm subsidies, pipelines, and health care. Only in retrospect do Jeremiah's claims seem so clear.

Still, we think, if only we had Jeremiah's resolve we could speak with Jeremiah's confidence. As he addresses King Zedekiah, his voice rings confidently in the halls of power. Ours rise plaintively as we suggest that cutting food subsidies in exchange for defense spending might be unwise, all the while knowing that we want to be safe and secure. Will food make us safer than bombs? It's hard to know.

Jeremiah speaks with certainty against Hananiah's prediction of an early exit from Babylon, telling the people to stay put and seek the welfare of the city. We waffle over immigration reforms that seek the welfare of no one, all the while wondering if there will be jobs for our children when they finish college. Will more people create more jobs in response to a need for more services, or will scarce resources get

scarcer? It's hard to know.

Jeremiah addresses war, poverty, hunger, labor, and crime. He diagnoses the distribution of wealth as a major contributor to the evils of society. He accused the politicians of misplaced alliances chosen for short-term prosperity rather than long-term security. It does sound familiar. But not clear.

We shouldn't let Jeremiah fool us into believing that the answers are always easy to see. Justice tangled with self-interest also plagues Jeremiah's congregation. Peace confused with national security haunts his constituents. The issues faced by Jeremiah are clouded by conflicting accounts, marred by misrepresentation of intention, and disputed by opposing experts. Hearing God's truth against the clamor of fear and greed is never easy, and the search for those who will speak God's truth never ends. It turns out that we don't have to go far from the church parlor to get ourselves thrown in a well.

Still, few of us go looking for conflict. Jeremiah probably didn't either. Like most of the best prophets, he's a reluctant one. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says he came to bring a sword, but surely he doesn't mean we should go out there and stir up trouble. This is the same person who later—when he could have used a little sword swinging—tells his disciples unequivocally to put the sword away (Matt. 26:52).

It's hard to imagine Jesus changing his mind so quickly. It's more likely he knows what Jeremiah and legions of other truth tellers before and after have known: speaking God's truth has a tendency to stir things up. Jesus' words to his disciples in today's reading ring more of readiness in the face of resistance than they do of preemptive strikes against the enemy.

Readiness for this kind of ministry requires a fair amount of fire in the bones. Decisions about parlor carpet only require us to be practical. The ministry embraced by Jeremiah and encompassed by Jesus depends on resolve that can sustain a person even from the bottom of a well.

Anyone who's been there knows that the most pressing matter is to get out. We don't want to be separated from our community, estranged from those we love; we don't want to be at odds with the prevailing trends. Jesus knew that his presence would create division, but he never wished for divisiveness. He wished for reconciliation, weeping over Jerusalem at the furtiveness of misplaced allegiances.

The voice of the prophet often sounds like righteous indignation, but it is rooted in compassion. As an extension of God's reconciling love, the prophet speaks reproach in order to make reparation possible. If Jeremiah didn't love the people of Judah and want goodness for the family of Zedekiah, he would have never uttered the first word.

Jeremiah uses a series of allegories that make perfect sense to the people who hear them. And like Jesus, who sets up the punch line of his parable to implicate the hearers in their own shortcomings, Jeremiah shows his listeners the error of their ways. Like Jeremiah, when we find just the right medium for God's message, we may find ourselves in the bottom of a well. When that happens, a little fire in the bones can go a long way.