

Sunday, June 5, 2011: 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

## What exactly qualifies as a fiery ordeal?

by [Jim Honig](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue

The reading from 1 Peter seems oddly disconnected from recent lectionary themes. What are we to make of this language of fiery ordeals and roaring lions during Easter season? It conjures up images of Joan of Arc, John Hus and others who met their ends in the cruel and literal flames of persecution. The language sounds ancient, like something that has nothing to do with me or with any of the people I serve.

I'm not even sure exactly what qualifies as a fiery ordeal. John Elliott writes that the most contextually relevant meaning of *pyrosis* (fiery ordeal) is the fiery process by which metal ore is separated from dross (*1 Peter* in the Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries). The author of 1 Peter sees innocent suffering as a divine test of faithfulness.

I think of Bonnie, whose newly married daughter-in-law was just diagnosed with a rare, terminal disease and who is, for the first time in her life, experiencing the kind of pain that causes her to doubt God. I think of Beverly, whose husband of 28 years has told her that he wants a divorce, or of Roger, who just found out that his company president has been indicted, that there's no money for the payroll, that the employees' pension fund was raided and that he no longer needs to show up for work.

Then I think back to a fiery ordeal that occurred in my own ministry. I had been in my first solo pastorate for a little over a year when the trouble started. A group cohered around one of the staff members and began to make accusations. No one was listening to them, they said. Everything was being decided by a small group of insiders who had no idea what the church really needed. As pastor I was concerned about this internal sniping, but I thought I was observing it as an umpire might observe a baseball game—involved, engaged, but not in the game. Within weeks the stormy vortex moved closer and centered on me. "The new pastor isn't pastoral. He listens only to the biggest contributors. He's just passing through our congregation

on the career path to the next big thing. When he visits members he doesn't even pray with them."

Was I being tested? I had a hard time accepting that interpretation. I believed mean and controlling people were harassing me. Was I sharing Christ's suffering? Honestly, I wanted no part of that. I wasn't even sure what that meant, but I was pretty sure I had no capacity for rejoicing in suffering. I just wanted everyone to get along and the nastiness to end.

The ordeal came to a dramatic conclusion when congregational leaders convened a congregational meeting on Palm Sunday afternoon "to review the accusations made against our pastor."

I had spoken about the accusations with a small group of leaders in the confines of meetings and meeting rooms, but I'd never heard these accusations made publicly. As I listened to them read one by one in the same room where all of us regularly worshiped together, I felt as if I were being physically attacked.

As they were read, however, something else began to happen. The murmuring and the whispering could have been the rumble of growing judgment, but thankfully it was something else: compassion, grace and support. By the time the meeting was over, it was clear that the congregation's ministry would go on and that I was going to be a part of it.

I felt no glory. While I was glad to continue serving with these people, I felt no vindication. Whatever glory there was came in the care and compassion of those who embraced me as a broken pastor and loved me back to life. Is that the spirit of glory about which the author of 1 Peter writes—that in the midst of hardship, trial, challenge, pain, hurt and brokenness, Christ still loves his church and constantly loves us back to life?

On Easter Sunday—believe me, it was the celebration of resurrection!—a wise parishioner lingered after the last service. When the narthex was nearly empty, she came over to me with her characteristic mischievous smile. "Pastor, I bet that was different from any lessons you learned in the seminary." She didn't have to provide a referent for the *that*.

"Different and harder."

"But I bet you wouldn't trade it for anything."

No, I thought vehemently. I wasn't at that point. The wounds were raw, and I couldn't see any of what I'd learned as a gift. I responded, "It's a good thing I didn't have to register for that class; I would never have signed up."

What does it mean to humble oneself? It's a hard discipline, and I'm not very good at it. More often I find myself humbled by my own missteps. While confidence and optimism can be assets, they can also be obstacles when I persist in trying to think my way out of a challenging situation apart from community. For me, humility is usually not a conscious decision and certainly not a way of life; instead, it's the brick wall I crash into when I've been too sure of my own way.

John the Evangelist has convinced me that Jesus was glorified in his own suffering and death. I'm not ready to say that my own suffering is necessary or efficacious in the same way that Jesus' suffering was. But I am ready to admit that in the crucible of the fiery ordeal, the God of all grace will restore, support, strengthen and establish God's people. I just wish it didn't burn so much.