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Matthew H. Diegel

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Fire in the Bones

Matthew H. Deigel

*Pastor, Christ Lutheran Church,
Windsor, Ontario*

Text: Jeremiah 20:7-13

One of the questions most often asked me when people learn of the small size of our congregation is, "Don't you get discouraged?" My exact answer varies somewhat, depending on who is asking the question and why they are doing so. However, its content remains basically the same: "Yes, I do get discouraged from time to time." I become especially so when I get trapped into the game of comparing our congregation with other ones, whose spokespeople can make their parishes sound so perfect, so lively, so beautiful. I also get discouraged when I read old reports concerning our congregation and realize that many of the dreams of our charter members, and of those who have joined later, have not yet been fully realized.

As I have also told many of you, during these times of discouragement I also sometimes begin to wonder what I am doing here: what does the future hold in store for us as part of the family of God gathered in this place? Sometimes, I even feel tempted at least to ask God to give us a break. For example, I got angry with God in May and June when in rapid succession the furnace, lawn tractor, and air conditioner broke down. I did not think that was especially fair, laying all those burdens upon us. Peter tells us that suffering builds character, but it was getting pretty ridiculous! Our characters were already ten feet tall! So also, in some of my daily devotions, I tell God that Christ Lutheran Church, Windsor, Ontario, has been small for long enough; it's time for us to grow and I want to be part of it!

All of us, I suspect, from time to time become discouraged and angry with the Creator. Such feelings are not only related to our congregational life, but to all the callings God has given us. For example, mothers and fathers, including my own, sometimes wonder aloud to God why they have received the ministry to raise children. They inform God they are a bit tired out, or that they are not sure they are doing so good a job. So also, many people discover that their jobs, to which they believed before that God had called them, have become routine, boring, seemingly without purpose. They demand of God why they are still here, instead of doing something more exciting and fulfilling. Then too, many persons complain to the Creator that they are tired of living as faithful followers; living and speaking God's Word seems to get them nowhere.

The prophet Jeremiah, in our First Lesson, expresses a similar, though far deeper, discouragement to God. True to his calling he has cried out the terrible things that will befall the Israelites, unless they turn back to God. However, no one has listened. Indeed, the night before this lament, he had been in the temple of Jerusalem performing his ministry, when the son of the chief priest had had him arrested. Jeremiah was beaten, and put in the stocks, left helpless outside during the long night. Now, the prophet has had enough. He cries out to God, "O Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived; thou art stronger than I, and thou hast prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; every one mocks me...The word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long." Even his friends have forsaken him; he is finished.

The Hebrew word translated here as "deceived" more correctly means "seduced", in the sexual sense. Thus Jeremiah is saying that God may have succeeded in getting him to serve, but only because of low-down trickery and enticement, because of the promise of beautiful things to come. Now, however, the prophet has seen through the divine deceit. The time of reckoning has arrived; it is almost as if Jeremiah is telling God either to come to his rescue, or to let him alone.

How often do we tell God to leave us alone? When do we inform the Creator that we want results or else we are through being the good Christian, and will instead do what the rest of the world seems to be enjoying so much? We realize that God

has called every one of us through the Gospel to be followers; however, at times, we wonder whether it's all worth it.

We have no clear idea how long Jeremiah remained discouraged; it might have been a long time, or as short as our text, written after the fact, seems to indicate. However, one thing is certain. At some point in his wavering the prophet realized that the call from God was still within him; God still had ministry for him to accomplish. Jeremiah describes this feeling as, "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." In spite of his weariness, in spite of his discouragement, Jeremiah knew he had to continue.

But how? How could he continue, after all he had endured? When runners in a marathon seem almost out of energy, the best ones suddenly have a burst of speed, enough to get them to the end of the race! Their training has enabled them to keep some adrenalin in reserve, something there when they need it the most. So also in Indy car racing the drivers can control the gas consumption throughout the contest, and then use this reserve in the final critical moments.

Likewise Jeremiah had a hidden reserve of energy, a force which would enable him once more to speak the word of God bravely, defying the taunts and the personal injuries he knew he would have to endure. This comfort he also knew came from God. The Creator, rather than being a seducer who had abandoned the prophet as soon as he had agreed to his call, had promised to remain with Jeremiah through everything he encountered. Whatever Jeremiah had to endure, so too God; whatever the prophet proclaimed, so did God. And, most importantly, whenever Jeremiah doubted, there was God, promising justice, promising the final turning into reality of the words he spoke. Those doing evil could have their fun now; God and Jeremiah would ultimately prevail.

So also, I believe, the Gospel reading appointed for this Sunday [Matthew 10:24-33] gives us new strength and hope to continue. Jesus reminds us that we are of infinite value to God, worth far more than what others (and even what we ourselves) may think of us. Always we are to walk erect, proudly proclaiming the good news. God promises to remain with us,

finally defeating all the forces that lead people to cling to the darkness, rather than to the promise of light and life.

The prophet Jeremiah shared his reason for continuing as a servant of God in his writings preserved in Scripture. Many of us, I believe, also have our own images and readings which serve to rejuvenate us, and to enable us to persevere. When I become discouraged in my ministry, both in this congregation and elsewhere, there are two pieces of art which spark within me that burst of energy to continue, which remind me of the timeliness of both God's presence and of God's promises. One, a crucifix, is on the wall in my office. On it, the figure of Jesus hangs, reminding me that through Jesus' life and death I am a forgiven sinner, a child of God, an heir of the coming realm of God. Never need I despair of doing the work to which the risen Lord has called all the baptized. At times the sense of discouragement may seem overwhelming, but that crucifix always serves to remind me that God has the final word, not the world. I also realize that God is calling me to pick up my own cross once more, and to continue on the journey, passing through both the good and bad that is to come, both in this congregation and elsewhere.

The second artwork which provides me with strength to continue conveys to me once more the promise of the eternal presence of God in the lives of the saints. When I was confirmed, my great-grandmother gave me a plaque depicting the risen Christ with his hand outstretched in blessing. Whenever I see or think of that image, I remember the promise of Jesus to be with all of us to the end of the age, wherever we are doing the Lord's work. Others may attempt to disprove or ignore the power and presence of the Creator, but this promise is to serve to strengthen us, and to lead us in our journey as disciples.

Perhaps during the coming fellowship hour it would be a good idea for us to share with each other what it is that provides us with the power to continue as God's ministers. Who knows: someone else's secret means of coping may well also become our's. What we tell each other may well provide comfort and renewal for someone who does not have an image or reading which is able to sustain them. At the very least during the coming week all of us can think privately about this hidden fire placed within all of us through Baptism. What does it feel

like when we do not allow it to surface? How does God enable us to use it?

So also, I encourage those of you so inclined to write your discoveries down, as Jeremiah did. I don't think I can promise that it will become part of the Bible. However, it might become part of our newsletter, or something I can share with a person who comes to me for comfort.

In our Baptism, the Holy Spirit places the fire of the good news within all our hearts. May God grant that we never leave it there, but instead ask God to empower us to continue to spread the message of reconciliation to all people, until the day when all that has been whispered is indeed proclaimed upon the housetops, and when the power of those who oppose the Gospel finally is at an end. Amen.