Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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When was the last time you let God have it in anger? I suspect lots of Christians balk at the idea of telling God off. It sounds irreverent, perhaps even blasphemous. Unlike us, our Hebrew ancestors knew that along with love, praise and petition, a deep relationship with God can withstand angry outbursts and even some whining.

Jeremiah is the champion lamenter of the Hebrew Scriptures — and that's saying something. (For another prize-winning complaint check out Psalm 22:7, 13-19 — and that's just one among a multitude of examples!) The Hebrew tradition of "fear of God" (utter awe at God's greatness and compassion) allowed for the expression of deep passion.

Remember Abraham? Questioning God took him to the threshold where God could make a promise greater than Abraham would have imagined (Genesis 15:1-6). Then we have Moses, who tried to avoid confronting the Egyptians by claiming a speech impediment; God reminded him of who gave humans the power of speech and then promised the human help he needed to do what he was called to do (Exodus 4:10-17).

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 3, 2023

Jeremiah 20:7-9
Psalm 63
Romans 12:1-2
Matthew 16:21-27

When we hear Jeremiah cry, "You duped me," our translation has made his complaint polite, washing out its passion. A translation truer to what Jeremiah said is: "You seduced me, Lord, and I let myself be seduced." Once again, we seem to be treading toward blasphemy, right? But listen as Jeremiah continues to pray: "I want to quit this ministry, but your word is like a fire in my heart. When I try to hold it in, it explodes inside me. I can't withstand it! It's about to break my bones!" Now that's a

lesson in praying with passion!

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What had happened to Jeremiah was that he received a new perspective. God enticed him into a mindset and course of action that he didn't want but couldn't refuse. This is what Paul tries to encourage in the Romans as he says, "Don’t conform to this age. Let yourself be transformed to learn what is really good and pleasing and perfect." Now, if you think we've drifted out of passion and into pious platitudes, you're missing the point.

Today's Gospel invites us to enter into the Christian adventure with countercultural passion. After last week's rendition of Peter's proclamation of faith, Jesus tells the disciples that being the Messiah is not what they would like to imagine. In response, moments after proclaiming unconditional faith, Peter became Jesus' tempter. Echoing the devil who urged Jesus to use his power for himself and make God his security blanket (Matthew 4:1-10), Peter reproached Jesus for talking about suffering.

Echoing his words to the devil himself, Jesus told Peter to get behind him. Yet, Jesus' approach to Peter was not really a dismissal. Using the same vocabulary he had used when he first invited Peter to discipleship, Jesus told Peter, "You are to follow me, not vice versa."

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With that, Jesus offered Peter the divine seduction. "Those who wish to save their lives ..." In other words, "Focusing on your own safety is a vicious circle — you'll never have enough of it. If you are free enough to give yourself, nobody can threaten you ever again."

Jesus was inviting Peter to remember why he had followed him in the first place. Jesus didn't call his friends to ascetic sacrifice, but to a life full of the unique joy that comes from the freedom to be for others. This was not a call to a discipleship of cheering a prophet or studying under a rabbi. Jesus was inviting Peter and company to share his very purpose in life.

Matthew, Mark and Luke recount this story as we hear it today. John communicates the same idea by quoting Jesus as saying, "I am the vine and you are the branches" (John 15). In both instances, Jesus was inviting them to an all-or-nothing choice: Become a part of me, or make your own path to wherever it will lead.

Might we take these readings as teachings about prayer and discipleship? Both Jeremiah and Peter had a bone to pick with God. And for both of them it had to do with going where they had never intended to go. But, as we saw above, Jeremiah received a new perspective. Nothing was forced on him. Nor on Peter and friends. They had their own ideas and God enticed them beyond their safe havens.

Today we're reminded that, whether we like it or not, the God of Jesus is the great seducer. God simply can't let us settle for puny expectations and sheltered sanctuaries. This God who risked creation and incarnation wants us to share the divine passion — to provoke us into finding our life by letting go.

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