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Sermon

Our God is a Consuming Fire

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

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We have before us in the Bible many examples of heroism and courage. Last week we heard a portion of Hebrews Chapter 11. It gave us a list of heroes of the faith. Nowadays, we are muddling together the ideas of hero and celebrity. It is possible, indeed normal to be one without being the other – some are both. Michael Jackson was a celebrity but not a hero. Many politicians are more noted for their self-publicity than their courage. On the other hand, many heroes wish to avoid the public spotlight.

I quote from Professor Geoff Guthrie's commentary on Hebrews¹,

In his 1995 review of the book *Churchill* by Norman Rose, Henry Kissinger offered insightful demarcations between true political heroes and mere superstars:

Our age finds it difficult to come to grips with figures like Winston Churchill. The political leaders with whom we are familiar generally aspire to be superstars rather than heroes. The distinction is crucial. Superstars strive for approbation; heroes walk alone. Superstars crave consensus; heroes define themselves by the judgement of a future they see as their task to bring about. Superstars see success in a technique for eliciting support; heroes pursue success as the outgrowth of inner values.

The modern political leader rarely ventures to comment in public without having tested his views on focus groups, if indeed he does not derive them from a focus group. To a man like Churchill, the very concept of focus groups would have been unimaginable.

Jeremiah and Jesus stand as heroes. Both were called to obedience to God's mission for them. Jeremiah is nicknamed the Weeping Prophet. His second volume is called Lamentations as he wept over the fall of Jerusalem and the judgement of God on his people. He had the hard task of driving home the message of God's displeasure and anger with his people. Because of their rebellion against God and his covenant with them, there would be consequences and the people had to be warned.

So we read of the call of Jeremiah as a young man to this challenging role (Jer 1:10):

"See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

¹ Guthrie G.H., 1998, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Pp138-139

If we dip into the record of Jeremiah's words we find his lament at having to bring a hard message to the people. He did not like the content of the words he had to deliver, and they certainly did not like receiving them!

Jeremiah 19:3 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Listen! I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal--something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind.'

'... I will devastate this city and make it an object of scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff because of all its wounds. I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and daughters, and they will eat one another's flesh during the stress of the siege imposed on them by the enemies who seek their lives.'

Then we read that the Chief Priest of the temple punished Jeremiah for speaking these words. He had him beaten and held in the stocks overnight.

Once this episode is over, Jeremiah complains to God saying (20:7)

O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

This was no easy calling. It was not about popularity or consensus. Jeremiah had to stand alone against the king, the leaders and the people and warn them they were wrong. It cost him dearly to tell them what God required them to know.

Gospel Reading

In today's gospel account, Jesus discerned a spirit and dealt with it. Most of us would have assumed the woman just had a chronic disability and either thought it was too challenging to pray for, or maybe prayed for some improvement. But Jesus used the spiritual gift of discernment, recognized that this particular disease had been caused by a spirit (the Greek says a spirit of infirmity) and set her free.

In doing that, he upset people. It was the Sabbath and they interpreted the law to mean he should not heal on the Sabbath. It doesn't say that, of course, it says you shall not work.

Jesus experienced opposition even and especially from the religious leaders. He responded forthrightly, "You hypocrites!" I don't suppose they liked that either. But it gives us an idea of how strongly he felt that he would speak so. It is interesting that Luke switches from referring to him as Jesus and calls him the Lord at this point. His words are authoritative and so it was appropriate to call him "the Lord." He went on to point out that they release a donkey so it can drink on the Sabbath and so it was necessary for him to release the woman from her bondage on the day of rest.

They took offence at his healing on the Sabbath. Now, I acknowledge that there are some among us who are uncomfortable with several of the practical things here: Spiritual insight, healing and deliverance. I sometimes hear complaints about those gifts being used. Sometimes God gives an insight into a condition he wants to heal – that is called the Word of Knowledge. Some people have not liked that gift being used here – although it is only given so that people may be healed or set free or helped in some way.

Sometimes he gives someone insight as to the spirit which is at work in a person or a group of people, whether it is divine, human or something demonic. That is called the Gift of Discernment and we see Jesus using that gift in the gospel passage.

Having identified the cause of the crippled woman's condition, Jesus set her free from the spirit and healed the condition. A few people here don't like the healing ministry and I can understand that some may be afraid

of the idea of demons and deliverance. But frankly, Jesus healed and delivered people – so if you resist or reject spiritual gifts and healing and deliverance may I ask you to consider whether you would have liked being around Jesus very much.

There was much conflict in Jesus ministry:

- Lk 4: Baptised, tempted, goes to Nazareth – people want to kill him.
- Lk 5: Healing of the paralytic – accused of blasphemy, challenged for eating with sinners.
- Lk 6: Accused of law-breaking over disciples rubbing corn on Sabbath, heals man on the Sabbath – Pharisees furious.
- Lk 7: Simon the Pharisee offended because Jesus allows the woman to anoint his feet and declares her forgiven.
- Lk 8: His mother and brothers think he is mad; after deliverance of Gadarene demoniac, the local people ask him to leave because they are afraid.
- Lk 11: He is accused of driving out demons by the power of Beelzebub. Criticised for not observing the washing traditions.
- Lk 13: Another trap set before him – they watch to see what he will do about a man with dropsy on the Sabbath. He heals him and rebukes them.
- Lk 15: Again the accusation of fellowship with sinners.
- Lk 16: Pharisees sneer at Jesus for his teaching on money.
- Lk 19: Leaders tell him to rebuke his disciples at the Triumphal entry. Cleansing of the Temple – Chief priests actively plotting to kill him.
- Lk 20: Challenge from the Chief Priests: “Who gave you authority to do these things?” Trap questions about paying taxes to Caesar and marriage in the resurrection.

And then we are into the Last Supper, arrest, trial and crucifixion. My point is that Jesus’ ministry was full of conflict. It was not all peace and sweetness, not all kindness and patience – love does not always mean being nice – sometimes real concern for another means having to warn, contradict or prevent actions. So we really should not be surprised if there is disagreement and conflict in the church – it is what Jesus experienced much of the time.

We have seen that Jeremiah and Jesus were called to ministries that provoked conflict because they had to correct people who were disobeying God and people don’t like that.

Hebrews 13

The thrust of this Epistle is that the New Covenant is better than the Old Covenant. So here in this passage the writer to the Hebrews reaches the final stage of his argument. He contrasts two mountains as representing two covenants. I hope that rings a bell for you. We saw exactly the same thing in Galatians 4 recently. Mt Sinai represents Covenant of Moses while Mt Zion represents the Covenant of Jesus.

Let us not be in any doubt that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. The difference lies in the atoning work of Jesus. In the Old Testament, we encounter the love and forbearance of God towards his people but also we are made aware of his anger against wickedness. In the New Testament, Jesus has mediated between God and believers and our sin is covered so we have the privilege of experiencing God’s goodness and grace towards us – precisely because Jesus has dealt with our wrongdoing by dying in our place on the cross.

The writer contrasts the fear and awe the Hebrews experienced at Mt Sinai with as many positive traits of the love and welcome that await believers in Jesus.

Mt Sinai = Old Covenant	Mt Zion = New Covenant
A mountain that cannot be touched	Heavenly Jerusalem, city of the living God.
Burning with fire	Thousands of thousands of angels in joyful assembly
Darkness	the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven
Gloom	God, the judge of all men
Storm	the spirits of righteous men made perfect
Trumpet blast	Jesus the mediator of a new covenant
The voice speaking unbearable words	the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. <i>(Abel's blood cried out for vengeance; Jesus blood has won our forgiveness.</i>
<i>Unapproachable</i>	<i>Welcoming</i>
<i>Terrible Awe</i>	<i>Love</i>

In verse 25-29, the writer concludes with a triple warning to believers.

Firstly: Obedience is important. We must listen to the voice of God. I noted as I read this chapter, that there is a parallel to chapter 3. In both we are to fix our attention on Jesus. In both we are urged to obey God when he communicates to us. 12:25: "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks." In chapter 3:7 "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." 3:12: "See to it brothers that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God."

Verse 25 continues, "If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?" Professor Guthrie comments, "God does not say to humanity, 'Whatever you have done, come – and oh yes, everything will really be OK even if you don't come, or even if you play at coming and then leave again!' No, grace must be received and enjoyed in the context of covenant. Those who reject the new covenant reject grace and embrace judgement."²

Our focus is forward to the hope that is set before us. However, we can only know anything about that future because God tells us about it. What we have in the Bible is the only sure revelation we are granted of that future hope. We must stay in line with that revelation if we want to hope in that future.

Secondly: we are warned that everything will be shaken to expose what is unshakable – the Kingdom of God. We might think of a garden sieve. You put a mixture of things into it and shake it and the good and the bad are separated. When God shakes creation, it will cause the dross which is not his unshakable kingdom to fall away revealing that which is his own and will stand.

Our culture is not the Kingdom of God. Some but not all of what we do in church is the Kingdom of God. We cannot be complacent nor assume what we like is necessarily what is important to him; we need to stay close and listen to him so he can correct us and direct us.

Whose voice will we listen to? Are we big enough to take correction from God's word or will we reject anything that makes us uncomfortable or challenges us?

Finally, we should not be complacent. These things are vital and eternally important for our God is a consuming fire. We are not playing games we are dealing with matters of great consequence. It is like handling electricity – it has the power to destroy you but if you handle according to the manual you are safe. This life needs to be handled according to the maker's handbook. Our God is a consuming fire.

² Guthrie, p426