

Bearing witness: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Sunday's Coming Premium

August 7, 2007

For all of his tears and lament, Jeremiah as portrayed in Jeremiah 1 is a bold young man mouthing off to God. Maybe the disrespect we sense in this exchange is not as dramatic as the disrespect that some of today's youth display toward their elders, but it's there all the same.

Just as God paused from conducting the grand symphony of creation to labor over a lump of dirt, the Sustainer of the universe takes a break from maintenance tasks to converse with a boy about his future. God is showing Jeremiah his birthmark, a designer label that says "made in the image of holiness." Like all humanity, Jeremiah has been created, consecrated and called to be a glimpse of the glory of God in the world where he has influence.

We too have been set apart to be a glimpse of God's glory—that is, to bear witness. We are to recognize, for example, that a medical miracle is a sign of the healing of God. We are to recognize that the restoration of a woman or person of color as a full member of society is a preview of a time when all will live together in harmony. We are to remember that our leadership of nations and kingdoms is only and always to give the world a glimpse of the just reign of God.

Instead of affirming a distorted reality, we who have encountered the Word made flesh are to counteract the amnesia that undermines contemporary Christian expression. Like Jeremiah, we have been set apart to accomplish the word of the Lord.

Unfortunately, even among us Christian leaders, conversations too often reflect a theology manipulated by ideological concerns. We read texts like today's to argue over abortion or to bicker about whether we should shop on Sundays. We make truth claims that fail to communicate a Christian witness because our concern is to be right rather than to bear witness to the God revealed in Christian scripture—much like the leader of the synagogue who quarrels with Jesus.

Even as Jesus brings health and wholeness to a woman created in the image of God, this religious leader turns attention to a legalistic interpretation of the fourth commandment. In his disrespect of Jesus, the leader exposes his own distance from the knowledge of God. Such detractors are alive and well in the 21st century as well. Using the Bible as an encyclopedic reference for tips and principles, they have made the divine universal design for peace, harmony and justice into fuel for quarrels among theologians, philosophers, historians and environmentalists.

Little is said to convey the Christian confidence that God is faithful to complete the work started when humanity was given the birthmark “made in the divine image.” We’ve forgotten the divine intention.

The words of the psalmist display the shift in the conversation that happened when the stooped woman was healed. Here the image of God speaks to the Holy One: “Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb. My praise is continually of you.” The arrogance is gone, replaced by outstanding praise. When the people of God turn to the One in whose image we are created, we are rescued from the grasp of the unjust and cruel. We no longer need to be afraid: the God whose image we bear is with us to deliver us from evil.

The lifestyle of Christians is to live the hope we speak: the Creator of the universe, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the One who raised Jesus from the dead, is reconciling the world to the original design of a place of justice, righteousness and peace.

That’s the boldness we see in Jesus, who, in human form, perfectly reflected the glory of God, the One who made the earth and heals the earth. The Creator of the universe sustains the universe. And while some of us take a vacation from the task Jeremiah hesitated to accept, God never sleeps or slumbers. The day set aside for us to rest does not mean that we should take a break from bringing to the world a glimpse of the goodness of God. Like that of Jesus, our witness is an expression of our worship and common life as a community of faith.

When the word of the Lord comes to us, will we be like the arrogant and the pretenders, challenging and arguing with God? Like the leader of the synagogue, they diminish the spirit of the law in rhetorical refutations of the letter of the law (Luke 13:14). Like voyeuristic viewers of reality television, they would rather gossip and complain than acknowledge that the word of the Lord still accomplishes what it

was intended to.

We are, instead, to announce the acceptable year of the Lord; acknowledge those of all cultures, nations and races as brothers and sisters; care for AIDS victims; dry the tears of prostitutes; seek justice for the imprisoned; receive those practicing homosexuality; welcome the woman caught in adultery; counsel the man obsessed with pornography; listen to the gang member and minister to single women with children. When we practice these things our words witness to the world a glimpse of the glory of God.

God still calls young men and women to be what Adam and Eve were—image bearers of God. God has never abandoned the creation project, but continues to shape a people filled with the Holy. The world cannot help taking notice. Only the morally blind would ignore the restoration of one of God's children in favor of a quarrel about issues of interpretation.