

“...know that on your account I suffer insult.” (Jeremiah 15:15)

My son Lukas has become a huge fan of the television show, “The West Wing,” now off the air on a weekly basis but available in DVD format a whole season at a time. You may know that the show gives an interesting behind-the-scenes peek at life in The White House and the challenging calling of an American president. I’ve watched a couple episodes here lately, a rather interesting exercise in this election season.

One recent episode dealt with the death of the president’s office secretary, killed in a car accident. The funeral is held in the National Cathedral—great hymns, moving sermon, touching tributes for a woman loved by many. After the service, after everyone has departed, the president (played by Martin Sheen) asks an aide to lock the doors of the church. He looks at the altar and walks toward it with purpose as he prays, visibly angry. “She bought her first new car and you hit her with a drunk driver...Have I displeased you, you feckless thug?” he asks. It takes a moment for the viewer to realize he’s addressing God. The prayer goes on for some time. “Am I really to believe that these are acts of a loving God? A just God? A wise God?”

The president does not hold back. The prayer is hard to hear and fairly rare, I suspect, for network television. I cringed when I first heard it. But I also realized that the producers of “The West Wing” knew something: *they knew the Bible*. They knew that such honest prayer—back-talking, even sassing, of God—is part of the biblical tradition in both testaments.

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I don’t know if you heard it clearly in this morning’s lesson, but Jeremiah absolutely rails against God. I’ve always loved the man’s honesty. He’s thrown into a cistern, up to his waist in mud. He’s slapped into stocks and publicly ridiculed. The poor guy has pretty much resigned his calling as a prophet. Let me paraphrase Jeremiah’s prayer that’s before us this morning: “Lord, I don’t have to remind you about all this, you know it already. It’s because of you that I endure all these catcalls, so stick it to these idiots. You got me into this Lord, it sure wasn’t my idea. I am completely worn out because of you. At first this life of following you was a joy and a delight. But now I feel so completely alone and never have any fun. No one understands. You make me sick, God. Why won’t my pain go away? Am I supposed to feel this way forever? *Where are you?* You’re like a mountain stream that never has any water in it. You have failed me.”

Wow. What do you make of these old words? We might call this a childish rant; the prophetic resignation of somebody who’s been pushed over the edge. But the Bible calls this something else. The Bible treats this honest exchange as a *prayer*. Now think about that. I don’t know about you, but very often my prayers are rather polished and sweetly edited, peppered with *thees*, *thous*, and *almighty everlastings*. As creator of the universe, God deserves our awe and respect. But if prayer is to matter, if prayer is to last, we must offer God what is actually *in* our hearts, not what *ought* to be there.

Praise and gratitude are certainly components of a healthy prayer life. But if we read the Bible closely, so are disappointment, anger, and doubt. God is not seeking knee-jerk, robotic obedience from his followers. God desires a real *relationship* with us. I suspect that you do not edit your conversations with your best friend, right? God desires that same intimacy. Honesty is a vital trademark of authentic prayer. Jeremiah, please notice, does not hold back. The full range of human emotion is offered to God. And please don't think this is an isolated instance. Many of the Psalms, the Book of Job, Lamentations, even prayers from Jesus himself are full of the same unedited honesty brought to voice by Jeremiah.

“God,” he says, “you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.” The old boy likens God to an intermittent mountain spring that's utterly undependable. And God allows such language. God takes it.

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But God, please notice, has a few words in reply for the despondent prophet. Jeremiah has truly resigned. He's had it. “Take this job and you-know-what with it,” he prays. And God listens. Truly listens and hears the prayer.

But God does not coddle Jeremiah. You might expect God to throw the big divine arm around the prophet's shoulder and say, “There, there now Jeremiah. Everything will be all right, sweetie” and all that. A pat on the back. An understanding ear. “Yes, those horrible men have treated you badly, haven't they?”

But God is not the Teddy Bear Jeremiah may be expecting or desiring. And if prayer is an honest two-way relationship, we may receive answers to prayer that we don't necessarily like all that much. So God essentially says to Jeremiah, “Okay, I've listened patiently. You've had a hard week. A hard life even. I get it. I hear you. But I need you out there. I need you to speak for me. These people you're complaining about—they will continue to fight against you. I'm not going to lie about that. People always have and always will resist my ways of justice and truth. But they won't get the best of you. That's my promise to you. I will deliver you. I will protect and redeem you. Now get out there.”

And so Jeremiah signs on for more. And if you read this book in its entirety, you'll discover his vocation remained difficult and quite challenging. Tradition has it that his own people got *so put out* with Jeremiah that they stoned the poor guy to death.¹ There are 52 chapters in this old book. Here in the 15th, rather early on, I like to think that this honest give and take about the call of God gave birth to some of the most powerful actions and words of faithfulness we have in the entire Bible.

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So let me say this on this Labor Day weekend. I don't know exactly how things may be going with you and your own call—your vocation. Whether you're presently looking for meaningful work, thinking hard about your current job and its demands, or reflecting upon your retirement and where God is now calling you.

But as believers, as baptized children, God sends us all on a wonderful and risky mission at whatever age we happen to be. I hope you are praying about that. Even laying before God the potentially exhausting aspects of your work.

Remember Jeremiah as you pray. His prayer reflected the honest relationship he had with God—a God who listens, allows us to vent about the vexing; and who sends us back into the world with an amazing promise:

“They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail; for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1979), p. 68.