

#41 15-16

Psalm 71:1-6

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 13:10-17

Hebrews 12:18-29

Faith of Gold

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain. *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.*

Our scriptures from today begin with the Psalm reading, where the author describes a feeling we so often have ~ this request for protection and statements of how his faith is something he depends upon to protect him from shame. Shame is an insidious emotion that can feel like the entire insides of our being are hopelessly gloomy and lost. And faith is about turning all of our souls over to the mercy of God, which in and of itself can release our souls from shame. "For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. 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." *So faith is about leaning and trusting that God will have dominion over our souls, even when they are threatened by the gloom of life.*

The Old Testament reading was the lovely tale of the calling of Jeremiah. So sweet, this insecure boy was given the gift to know that he was treasured by God ~ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." And it is his honesty in speaking his truth before God which gave him the skills he needed to become who God was calling him to be. *So faith is about knowing who you are and speaking your truth ~ sharing with God your needs ~ and trusting that God will help you meet those needs.*

Our Gospel is about a woman who was "crippled in the Spirit," and Jesus restored her from the slumped over burdened woman, staring at the ground, to someone who could stand tall. This Christ can do, whether the person was truly physically healed or not – because for her – Jesus restored her out of his compassion. I sometimes wonder what may have gone in through her mind when he suddenly got in trouble for helping her on the Sabbath – as though compassion is a job one clocks in and out of. There is no mention of her asking to be healed; Jesus just takes it upon himself to heal her. And her reaction is joy. What a reward for all! To witness joy is a blessing. *So faith is about rejoicing at goodness, even if you aren't directly involved.*

And the Hebrews scripture I read, is the author's way of trying to explain the history of the Judaic faith in light of Christ. In the beginning he is making reference to Mt. Sinai – where there is gloom and fear – saying we are no longer there – we are at Mt. Zion – a heavenly place! And he writes: "*Therefore, since we*

are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire."

Now, that sounds a little strange – rejoice for we will be consumed by fire. But that is not how the author or his hearers would have comprehended this. Rev Gray Temple wrote about this:

"In both testaments we find a God who is 'a consuming fire.' Since we cannot escape that fire by leaving the synagogue and crossing over to the church, let us learn what we can about that fire . . . In the Bible, fire is not torture: fire is purification. Fire is used to refine metals. The smelter melts and pours off the gold or silver, then skims off the dross until he can see his own face reflected in the molten metal - not a bad metaphor for God's judgment.

The question arises, What get purified and how?

Suppose, for example, you are a gossip, or a drunkard, or an embezzler, or a tax cheat. How would God's fire make you different?

To be a cogent image, the fire of God must consume something in each of us that goes deeper than our sins. God's fire must purge away the false self from which our worst sins arise."

The fire is one of purification. Therefore we can be grateful to God for helping us to rediscover our true self – the one that can fully be in communion with God. *Faith is a journey to self discovery and the shedding of our false selves.*

WOW! So much about the power of faith, in case anyone out there is overlooking it, or needs a reminder of what is possible. *Faith is about: leaning and trusting that God will have dominion over our souls, even when they are threatened by the gloom of life; knowing who you are and speaking your truth ~ sharing with God your needs ~ and trusting that God will help you meet those needs; rejoicing at goodness, even if you aren't directly involved; and a journey to self discovery and the shedding of our false selves.*

We are all being purified by faith – it is about being given safe opportunities to shed shame and fear and insecurities and our false selves, so that we can have lives which we can look at and say they are pure and clear and worthy.

Annie Dillard wrote these words about our faith:

"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

There is such a power here today – and may we know it every day ~ a power of purification and empowerment. We have the opportunity to feel all the feels; love more than we could imagine – and feel overwhelmed by the love we receive; to experience our lives with more integrity and clarity than we imagined possible; to rejoice in the miraculous power of faith! So valuable is faith . . . the purest, finest of God - and we are that Gold! Peace be with us all, trust in Christ, and may we lean continually on our Faith. AMEN