

“We respond joyfully with our lives, as the grace of God gives us freedom” by Jill Jospeh

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During the season re-commitment, I approached the preparation of these reflections with the Lectionary in one hand and our Commitment Statement in the other, much as others have preached to us with the Lectionary in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

Almost 2 years ago I began joining you for worship and over a year ago I stood before you reading aloud the member's commitment statement. I am now in the process of discernment regarding Stewardship. Therefore, as I often say, these comments are offered by one who is quite new to this community, but one who is deeply engaged.

Today I ponder the fundamental question of why is it that we come together in a community of faith, in this community of faith.

In thinking about this, in pondering covenant and promise, it is often traditional to contrast the covenant of law as found in Hebrew Scripture and the new covenant of faith or grace as found in the New Testament. The implication is, of course, that the former is coarse and limited, the second spacious and true. Today I will suggest to you that this characterization is far too simplistic. It seems to me that the reasons for binding oneself to God in communities are complex and weave together both the dark and the light, both the coarse and the spacious. For me to deal with commitment and recommitment is to confront the imperative of honesty and recognize both these impulses in our history and in myself.

In reading today's Scripture, I begin by suggesting that I at least see there understandable but profoundly flawed impulses toward religious expression and commitment.

In Lamentations we read, "how lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!,,, the roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals... her foes have become her masters, her enemies prosper... because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions."

The implied message is clear: through faithfulness and right-living as a community we can protect ourselves from vulnerability, destruction, and grief. And who among us will

deny that woven into our prayers and our gatherings, and our commitments is the yearning to be protected and safe? Not just from the tsunamis and the earthquakes and the mundane horrors that afflict our world, but from humiliation and, yes, from doubt and uncertainty. Perhaps, if we are to be honest, from the ultimate vulnerability of seeing ourselves as we are.....

In Psalm 137 we read: "by the rivers of Babylon-there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps, for there our captors asked of us songs and our tormentors mirth... O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be they who pay you back for what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and bash them against the rock!"

I suspect that you, like I, gasp and turn aside from those final verses, perhaps conveniently characterizing them and dismissing them as "Old Testament" and therefore nothing that we need to seriously consider. Yet what is spoken of here is the impulse to assure that our community's vision of justice is achieved, our world view dominant and successful. And has not my rage risen as I listen to protesters suggest that soldiers die in Iraq or Afghanistan because this country tolerates homosexuality? And the need not be so dramatic, for it is the quotidian resentments and lust for "right revenge" that I often need to confess. Do I not pray that my sister-in-law who has hurt me will somehow come to her senses? But if I am really honest, can I dare to see that woven into this prayer is the unspoken aspiration that she understand I am a truly lovely person and, in so doing, suffer remorse and pain, at least enough so I feel vindicated?

In Paul's second letter to Timothy we read, "to Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. I am grateful to God-whom I worship with a clear conscience as my ancestors did....."

And who among us does not want to be confident of their own righteousness, to have a community that assures such righteousness? Is my commitment to daily practice, my accountability free of this contamination? Certainly not. In the still of early-morning prayer, in the silence of meditation, in the darkness of my spiritual life, I sense low murmurs of dread and anxiety about the state of my soul. And how better to contain them and therefore ignore them than by assuring myself that I am "doing everything right". Are these practices to bind me to the unknowable, the mysterious, the passionately loving God that I find in brief moments of light and in long years of darkness? Or are they to bind me to the respect, and perhaps the affection, of my Mission Group? Today I confess to you that they are both, for I, too, would have a community that permits me to live with a clear conscience.

And finally, the Gospel of Luke tells us, "The apostles said to Jesus,' increase our faith!' And Jesus replied, 'If you had faith only the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea', and it would obey you." The equation is simple. Sufficient faith equals power. I suspect few of us would go about dealing with hapless mulberry trees. But I do aspire to power... good power, of course! Perhaps most fundamentally, I yearn for the power to be who I want to be: confident and calm, helpful and resilient, accountable and prayerful, quiet and reflective. Unfortunately, of course I'm not like this at all. I too easily become anxious and agitated. I try to be helpful but

am often distracted and my resiliency feels like a sham. I've are ready confessed the bad news about my accountability and prayerfulness. As far as quiet and reflective goes, I often laugh that God simply picked the wrong noisy, distracted woman for call to a life of prayer. I have to discipline myself to keep from interrupting. I too quickly think I know the right answers. Yes, I would like power of the most fundamental sort. The power to be what I want to be rather than what I am: sturdy but flawed, hopeful but chastised, committed yet questioning.

My suggestion is, however, that our readings today are as complex as life and faith itself. True, they suggest that our yearnings for community and commitment and faith may arise from the need to protect ourselves, to assert our visions of justice, to be confident in our righteousness, to have power.

But walk with me again into today's readings and listen again, as I did, to the light and the hope.

Does not Lamentations suggest that the community of God is a community that can see the world as it is, however painful. We can hear those whom we love weeping bitterly in the night. We can know that foes can become masters and enemies prosper, that the world's children can be taken away as captives.

And does not Psalm 137 tell us that the community of God is a community that remembers and tells stories, often hauntingly beautiful stories, whose poetry insures that we never forget the times of darkness and pain? These are the stories that permit us to remember and in remembering, bind ourselves in

new ways. "If I forget you, O Jerusalem...." and we will not forget, but instead pass on the stories and the songs.

And does not Paul's second letter to Timothy tell us that the community of God is a community within which we can discover our place and our call. Does not Paul speak of the God who calls us, "not according to our own works but according to God's own purpose and grace.." and in whom we can know that we, like him, may be appointed "a herald and an apostle and a teacher."

And does not Luke suggests that the community of God is a community of radically simple hope in which we set about doing what we are called to do, just because we are called. This radical hope is not the hope of recompense or reward or even of justice. It is certainly not the hope of retribution. It is the simple hope that we can do the small things that have been given us to do. And that, in so doing, we both express and increase our faith.

Thus the light and hope about communities of faith spoken of in today's readings: we might remember together, tell our stories, discover our call, and commit ourselves to radically simple hope.

What I suggest here is that the religious impulse, our yearning for commitment is woven of light and dark, that both are common in our scriptures, in our history, and in our lives. We are called to discover and claim these paradoxes and contradictions. Not that we might become discouraged, not that we might turn aside. But rather that our commitments and

re-commitments might be as deep and wide, as honest and true, as we might make them. These paradoxes and contradictions permit us to “respond joyfully with our lives, as the grace of God gives us freedom”, knowing that the simple answers, and partial truths, and comfortable lies will never be enough to draw forth our honest and joyful response to the One who calls us each by name.

A year has passed. Some things accomplished, and others not. Some promises kept, some set aside for new growth, some failed. Prayers that were said and unsaid. Dreads and fears that haunted our dreams and moments of quiet peace. But we are all welcome here. Here at this abundant table. Here in this community of seekers. Here in this community of men and women struggling to be honest with themselves and one another, knowing both times of darkness and times of light. Here in this community willing to commit to another year, relying on the spirit of power and of love, knowing that our calling is, as Paul says, “not according to our works but according to God’s own purpose and grace.”

Amen.