



**Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time A
August 30, 2020**

- ◆ **Jeremiah's Dark Night of the Soul**
- ◆ **"Godly Seduction" by Patricia Sanchez**

This Sunday's first reading (Jeremiah 20:7-9) is one of the best known and most powerful in all of our three-year cycle of readings. The following is my Small Christian Community commentary on these verses.

In the Book of Jeremiah, we find five intensely autobiographical pieces, often called the "confessions of Jeremiah" (11:18, 12:6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-18). In these so-called 'confessions,' Jeremiah bares his heart to us, sharing with us the cost of discipleship and his struggle with God. They give us an insight into Jeremiah's "dark night of the soul" (a phrase coined by the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, to speak of those times when one feels abandoned by God or feels no sense of his presence). The 'confessions' also speak of Jeremiah's personal misgivings about his ability to be an effective messenger of God in the public forum. We are very fortunate to have this intensely personal sharing into the soul of one of Israel's greatest prophets.

During a turbulent time in Israel's history, Jeremiah is called by God to deliver a message that his people do not want to hear. Jeremiah must condemn the corruption in the temple liturgy, the people's involvement in foreign cults, their violation of the covenant, and their neglect of the poor. Prophets are not known for their "feel good" messages.

Today's verses open with Jeremiah sharing with us that in his call, he is duped or seduced by God (see Jer 1:4-6). He feels God has 'put one over on him' and he has allowed it to happen. In ways, he feels sorry for saying 'yes' to God.

As a sensitive and caring soul, Jeremiah does not enjoy being the "object of laughter" and having "everyone mock him." But the people beat him up and throw him in a dark dungeon. Being a messenger of God is no fun (at least not for Jeremiah). On the contrary, it only brings him "derision and reproach all day long." All of

this leads Jeremiah to consider "early retirement." *"I say to myself, I will not speak in his name anymore."* But the divine fire received at his call cannot be extinguished. For Jeremiah, the only thing worse than being God's prophet is saying "no" to God's call.

Patricia Datchuck Sanchez has a very good introduction to today's readings and also great commentaries on all three readings.

Introduction—Godly Seduction

Have you ever been seduced? Given the fact that the term seduce is defined as "the act of enticing, beguiling or winning another over to a desired state or position" (The American Heritage Dictionary, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston MA: 1982), it seems safe to assume that every one of us has been seduced at one time or another in our lives.

Some of us are seduced by love and others of us yield to hatred. Some are seduced by ideas and/or what are perceived or presented as ideals. In the 1930s and 40s, Hitler seduced thousands with the notion that blue-eyed, fair-haired Aryans were the superior race and that other "lesser" individuals should be exterminated. Over 6,000,000 died as a result of that seduction. In 1978, almost 900 people died in Guyana, having been seduced by Jim Jones into accepting him as their leader. Some in the group committed fraud for him, others murder; in the end all committed suicide by his order. Other such cult figures had exercised similar powers of seduction over their followers, e.g., David Koresh, Branch Davidians, Marshall Applewhite, Heaven's Gate, Shoko Asahara, Aum Shinrikyo.

Some among us are seduced by power; others by luxury, leisure and prestige. Some of us allow ourselves to be seduced by trends in fashion and go to great lengths and great expense to wear whatever style or brand name has cornered the market for its fleeting fifteen minutes of fame.

Aware of the human penchant for seduction, advertising moguls use every possible means to seduce consumers; researchers determine which colors, shapes

and designs are more appealing and test-market their products to ensure the greatest monetary success from their commercial seduction. Politicians' ads seduce with busy words, catch-phrases and platforms, built on appealing promises.

Obviously, seductions vary; some are good and beneficial, whereas others are evil and harmful. Both extremes are exemplified in today's Scripture readings. In his Roman correspondence (second reading) Paul is exhorting his readers not to be seduced by the world ("Do not conform ourselves to this age") but to surrender to the seduction of the God whose mercy will transform and renew them. In the gospel, Peter succumbs to seduction and is denounced by Jesus as a Satan, a tempter. Although he had just declared Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (see last week's gospel), Peter's messianic expectations were not consonant with God's saving plan. He was seduced by the popular anticipation of a royal messiah, who, with military might, would rout the enemies of Israel and Judah and firmly establish a reign wherein his people would enjoy prestige, prosperity and power over all the nations of the earth. Suffering and death were far from Peter's mind because he had not yet made his own the mind of Christ. For this reason, Peter was harshly reprimanded by Jesus.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, was seduced (in Jeremiah 20:7, "duped" is more accurately rendered as "seduced") by God and by the Word of truth and judgment that he was sent to speak to his contemporaries. That he tried to resist the divine seduction is clearly evident in today's first reading. Seduced by God, Jeremiah was, nevertheless, also strengthened by God for the inevitable resistance he would encounter during his ministry. Because he has shared his struggle with us so frankly, Jeremiah can be revered as a model for disciples of both covenants.

As we reflect on Jeremiah's experience of the divine seduction and his subsequent love affair with God, we are also reminded that the Sacred Seducer of Sinners is still at work, enticing and beguiling each of us in an effort to win us away from sin and self and draw us toward life and goodness. There is no place to hide, to flee or to escape from the love which calls us to wholeness and holiness, all the while reverencing our freedom to resist and reject such a gift.

FIRST READING: JEREMIAH 20:7-9

Today's first reading is an excerpt from that part of the prophet's writings now known as his "confessions." Later inserted into Jeremiah's oracles, visions and discourses by a redactor or by the prophet himself, these confessions (see also 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18) are a personal testimony to the cost of Jeremiah's discipleship and dedication to the word of God. More than any other biblical writer (except, perhaps, for Paul), Jeremiah bares his pain in unabashed and almost brutal candor. An audacious ambassador of God's word, he was also audacious in his complaint about the difficulty of his mission.

More important than his complaining, however, is the insight Jeremiah shares concerning the phenomenon of prophetic inspiration. He likened his mandate to a fire burning in his heart that he could not contain or control (v.9). In spite of his desire to be relieved of such a daunting responsibility ("I say to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak his name no more."), Jeremiah could not suppress or silence the word that demanded a hearing. Compelled by the power of that word, Jeremiah could not and would not be silent despite every effort (dungeon, stocks, flogging, derision, and even the threat of death) on the part of his contemporaries to do so.

Whether they wished to hear him or not, Jeremiah denounced the corruption of the temple liturgy, decried the dabbling into foreign cults, chastised the many breaches of fidelity to the covenant, castigated those who ignored the needs of the poor and predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. He was, as Walter Brueggemann has noted, "God's man." In that capacity, Jeremiah championed the truth because he was utterly convinced that: (1) truth is not our autonomous judgment but is only from God; (2) truth is not private, apart from public events; (3) truth does not go undisputed in a world of lies and deception.

Jeremiah's seduction by God's love and his subsequent unrelenting dedication to the truth of God's word have set the foundation for our understanding of Jesus. Like Jeremiah who suffered all rather than betray God's love, Jesus willingly suffered and died so that sinners would continue to know and experience that love in the new and everlasting covenant that Jeremiah had foretold (31:31-34).

Given the intensity with which both men lived their lives, contemporary believers may have cause to wonder: Would a Jeremiah or a Jesus find acceptance

in today's world? Would they gain a hearing, or would their boldness and tenacity be dismissed as "fanatical" or "on the fringe"? Would they be censured because of their seemingly blasphemous approach to and unconventional intimacy with God? On the other hand, given the personal risks and challenges involved in such a ministry, are there any among us willing to embrace it as did Jeremiah and Jesus? If we are unwilling to take on the challenge ourselves, then let us, at the very least, lend an open ear and heart to those with the courage to do so.

SECOND READING: ROMANS 12:1-2

Paul writes: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."

Surprising as it may seem, relatively little is known for certain about the origins of the church in Rome. Paul did not found the community there; indeed, at the time he wrote his letter to them (ca. 56-57 C.E. from Corinth), he had not even visited the Christians of Rome; what we do know is that the Roman church emerged within the context of Rome's sizeable Jewish community. Someone, who remains unnamed to the present day, preached the good news of salvation in the empire's capital city and by the early 40s C.E. a viable Jewish Christian community had been established. Gradually, the complexion of the church became more universal as gentile believers were welcomed into the fold....

In our second reading, Paul begins with a basic consideration: Christians would live in this world as if their Christian mode of life were offering worship to God. Unlike Judaism or the various cults of Rome which offered animal sacrifices, Christians are called to present themselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.

In order to become a living liturgy, as it were, believers must necessarily resist conformity to all that is not Christ in order to be transformed and renewed by Christ. Not a purely personal feat, this resistance and transformative renewal are prompted and sustained by grace. Nor is the transformation and renewal of the believer a merely external or cosmetic change. On the contrary, Paul calls his readers to a renewal of their

mind, such that their conversion is an interior movement toward Christ that will express itself in all they are, do, say, think, decide and choose.

As Paul's exhortation is repeated in our hearing today, we, too, are reminded that we who belong to God and to Christ and who live by the power of the transforming Spirit are to be seduced by none other. Seduced and supported by grace, we are thereby consecrated and called to live holy and wholesome lives before the Lord and all others.

GOSPEL: MATTHEW 16:21-27

Seduced by God's Word so as to be a living sacrifice, disciples of Jesus must also be in every way surrendered to him and to the saving plan of God at work in him. In this Matthean text, contemporary believers are afforded a glimpse at Peter's painful experience of surrendering to Jesus. In today's Gospel, Peter is made to realize that he must surrender all his hopes and preconceptions regarding the manner in which Jesus would exercise his messiahship. His would not be a military rule that would thwart Judah's oppressors and restore it to the power and prestige it had enjoyed under David and Solomon. Rather, Jesus' reign would be established in faithful human hearts and would be accomplished through his suffering and death on the cross.

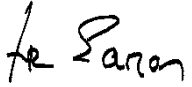
When Jesus intimated that his would be a suffering messiahship, Peter reacted with understandable shock and disappointment. "God forbid," he objected. Jesus' response was harsh and cutting. Henri Nouwen (Jesus, A Gospel, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.:2001), in a reflection on this text, suggested that Jesus appeared to regard Peter's reaction as the most dangerous of all for those in quest of a truly spiritual life. Peter had yet to learn to think as God thinks and to surrender his own ideas, his own will, his own ways to God. This he would eventually learn to do, and that surrender would bring him a share in the sufferings of Jesus. By the time the Matthean Gospel appeared in written form in the mid-to-late 80's, the community of believers in Jesus had come to know, firsthand, the suffering that comes with surrendering to Christ.

As Nouwen has further reflected, there is no day without many losses. If we are sensitive to God's will and God's ways, we quickly realize how many things are not happening in the way we had hoped. People aren't saying what we expected; the day is not evolving as we wanted. Disappointments and frustrations abound. Even our best-laid plans fall through. Yet, if we live with

these losses for the sake of Jesus and in communion with his own sacrificial surrender, these losses can set us free—free from ourselves, free to welcome the new life that comes from God. Seduced, sacrificed, surrendered, this was the pattern set by Jesus; this is the path to be followed by all who would minister in his name.

[Used with Permission, *The Word We Celebrate: Commentary on the Sunday Lectionary Years A, B, C*, by Patricia Sanchez, - Sheed & Ward publisher (9-1-89.)

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Pat Sanchez". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.