

Over the past two weeks, I've been deep rereading The Letter to the Hebrews. No matter how many times I do this, no matter how many times it cycles through the lectionary, Hebrews is the one book in the Bible that I just can't seem to get. To me, it seems grim and sacrificial, a glorification of suffering, and some of its references are so obscure they lose me. At the same time, this difficult letter contains some of the most memorable and most challenging lines in the New Testament. Here are three that always make me think. The first, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (10:31) The second one we heard last Sunday: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (11:1), and third we heard today: "Our God is a consuming fire." To enter the Letter to the Hebrews is to encounter a consciousness that can feel so alien that the only way to begin to understand it is through prayer. Even the commentators get lost. We don't want a fearful God or a way of being we can't see plainly, nor, especially in Northern California, is it easy to see consuming fires as holy, especially with the Pickett fire burning over the hill.

Sometimes, it can feel like just too much. So today we meet a woman so bent over she cannot stand. And yes, it is a fearful thing to encounter someone that broken and yet still alive. Is not the defining characteristic of being human that we walk upright? Some years ago, I saw that very woman at Kaiser and my heart rushed to her. I wanted to touch her and help her rise, but I could not. I could only stand there, sad with her suffering, and think how unfair it was.

And now, we live in a culture which openly revels in suffering and unfairness bolstered by laws and an economy that reward the rich and shame the poor and the sick. Even shade from the heat has become a sign of privilege. Suffering has become not just a fact of life, but a weapon of domination.

Into all of this walks Jesus. He doesn't blame the woman for her lifestyle choices; he heals her. His ministry is to restore humanity to health and wholeness, not to crush us into submission. A dictator demands that he become the center of my world. Jesus asks me to make God the center of my world. A dictator likes his women bent over. Jesus likes us standing.

Which is to say, being bent over is not just a physical infirmity. It is also an outward and visible sign of oppression. Think of the men at CECOT Maximum Security Prison in El Salvador, their heads shaved, their backs bent.

Jesus meets a child of God in the synagogue. She has been bent for eighteen years and he helps her stand.

But instead of giving thanks, the authorities say, "How dare you! You have six perfectly good days on which to cure people."

And yet, from another perspective, what better day for Jesus to make a woman whole? There are two versions of sabbath in Torah: in Exodus it is observed as a day of absolute rest. In Deuteronomy, it is observed as the day God set us free from slavery. Is the earlier version truer than the later one?

Believe it or not, this very argument lies at the center of the Letter to the Hebrews. Can a covenant, once made, be grown? Yes, God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but laws are interpreted by human beings, and times change. Can we find new understandings of the Law to meet our present reality, or are we going to cling to the way things were and even distort the law in such a way as to make it cruel? (Which, by the way, is what some on the far right are doing with the Constitution.) Hebrews calls us to rise to our own occasion. Jesus is not the lawgiver, only Moses can be that. We are all unique. We may riff on one another, but we do not repeat. Jesus is the law made human, and that law is a law of love because humans were put on earth to

love. It's hard to love when you're broken. Nor can we rest, says Jesus, until we have all been made whole.

Today's reading from Hebrews is like music: the thunder and lightning of Moses on Mt. Sinai and the light of heaven shining through Jesus who is lawgiver, prophet, and God. His covenant is not just about being freed from slavery in Egypt, it is about being freed from fear and death. Neither is easy because freedom isn't easy.

In today's passage from Hebrews, God shakes up the heavens and the earth, not to punish us, but to open us and teach us how to stand firm in the Kingdom of Love no matter what.

When God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai, the mountain trembled with cloud and flame, things that cannot 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." If this sounds like the relentless blare of the daily news come to make us angry and afraid, you wouldn't be wrong. The Israelites were so terrified at the appearance of God that they told Moses they would do whatever God asked if God would only stop. So Moses went up the mountain alone.

That wasn't exactly what God wanted. God wanted us all to hear, and but we chose to let our fear of the unknown rule us.

God is not a security blanket in which to hide. All the eruptions in today's readings are there to remind us that like fire, love does have to capacity to overwhelm us. Remember how you felt when you first fell in love. For me it felt like being on fire. Passion tests our ability to remain grounded in a storm, for it is up to us, with God's help, to remain unshaken. That is how we will live through the impossible.

It's much easier said than done.

Now you know how I feel about moment in which we are now living. The world wants me scattered, shaken, distracted, and afraid. The world wants me bent. The world wants me to give up my dignity and submit to a man's discipline. It makes me think of a passage in Luke I've always liked: "The kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. (Or touched, to add the phrase from Hebrews.) No one will say 'Look! Here it is,' or 'There it is!' because the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21)

The kingdom of God is within you. God can't get any closer than that.

"Our God is a consuming fire," says today's reading. Our consumer economy is one of eating and destruction. But that is not the way that God consumes.

We first meet God's consuming fire when Moses goes beyond the wilderness and encounters a bush which burns without burning up, because it burns not as fuel but with the radiance of God's love. Love will always prevail over hate because hate eventually burns its practitioners to a crisp while love never dies.

Yes, my friends, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But it's worth it. God may be invisible, but she keeps her promises. And she's thrilling.

We all know we're in for a wild ride. God wants you to stand tall. With God all things are possible. L'hayim! My dearest ones. To life! Amen.