

Covenant Word

Hung Up in the Middle

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 86; Matthew 10:24-39

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
June 22, 2008*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

Not known for my athleticism, we have never dared too many physical challenges on our vacations. Our recent trip to St. Lucia, however, found us attempting activities for which I had to keep up or be left behind. Three different days we left the comforts of our hotel to have great adventures. On one, we snorkeled in the Caribbean...spotting vibrantly colored fish that we thought lived only in the imagination of Disney. Another day, we rode individual four-wheelers through banana plantations and coconut groves. We trekked up paths made of lava rocks to the tops of cliffs that allowed us magnificent views of the island and the crystal clear ocean waters.

Our third outing was a trip to the Tropical Rain Forest that constitutes the center of the island. I had heard our church member, Eljee Bentley, talk about how she had "done" a zip line with her grandchildren when she went to Costa Rica. So when my children talked about our doing a zip line, my first thought was, "Well, if Eljee can do it, surely I can too." I did not, obviously, give Eljee enough credit!

We drove into the forest bedazzled by the lush greens and tropical flowers. As we walked into the encampment, I heard an unusual "zzzzzzz." While images of human-sized insects began to enter my imagination, I soon realized that it was only our guides checking the zip lines. We were to be the first group out that day.

We put on harnesses, helmet and gloves. Then we began to walk to the first landing. It was not far... only a little ways down a path and then up about 10 steps to a wooden landing. Each person had three clips that attached the harnesses around their body to the zip line. We were told to hold one hand on the harness lines across our chest and the other back

behind us, making an OK sign with our fingers around the line. It would keep us from turning around backwards, and, if we kept the circle open, it would insure our making it all the way down the line and to the landing on the other end.

I wasn't overly concerned until one of the teenage girls who had joined us began to panic. The only way to get her across was for the guide to travel the line with her. "zzzzzz" they took off. As I watched her expressions of fear, I kept checking in with myself. "What's the big deal? If Eljee did this, then so can I!" About that time, I got close enough to really see the metal line. It was only about the width of a pencil and was 200 feet above the ground. There were only three little clips to keep me and all my harnesses attached to that line. I searched for the next landing. Where was it exactly? Then the truth dawned on me. I was expected to fly through the air without being able to see the other side! "zzzzzz" Only one more person and then it would be my turn. I began to repeat what had become my mantra, "Eljee Bentley! Eljee Bentley! Eljee Bentley!"

Now the person just before me did something about which we had all been forewarned. The OK signal has to be kept open. If you close your fingers around the line, you will slow down and stop. In

her fear, she closed her fingers down around the wire and she stopped... dangling...hung up right in the middle of the rain forest. The guides began to talk her through the steps of getting to the

platform. "Look at us," they said. "Don't look down. Put your hands in back of the pulleys and begin to pull your way to the platform. You can do it! You can make it! Come on! A little closer and we will pull you in." I couldn't tell if what was running down her face were tears or sweat or both, but gradually, with each hand over hand, she pulled herself in. We all cheered.

But then it was my turn. The guide turned to me, commanded me to sit down and while I thought I was sitting on the edge of the platform, the truth is that I was already hanging in the air with only the guide holding on to the back of my harness. Before I could protest, "zzzzz!" I was off.

Now I wish that I could confess to you that my spiritual life has always been like this...safely fastened on to God's grace and harnessed in to the spiritual disciplines that would take me quickly and without a glitch to the other side, whether it was in sight or not. I would enjoy presenting an Indiana Jones-type heroine that has mastered a true journey of trusting faith. But the truth is there have been



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enormous lengths of time when I have hung in the middle: dangling there without the strength or energy to pull myself to the other side; waylaid by controversy or despair; or worse, tragically believing that hanging in the middle was safer than taking a stand on either side. I have also experienced the times of being so stuck in the middle that it took someone to come down the line and wham into me to move me off dead center so that I could claim the gospel's challenging truth rather than being deafeningly silent. Those were and are bruising and jarring times that a body can rarely forget much less from which the soul quickly recovers.

So I am wondering if this isn't what Jesus means in this missionary missive from today's Gospel reading.

Jesus has called his disciples into service. He is preparing to send them out. Jesus is empowering them to do Kingdom work. In His instruction, however, He includes solemn warnings. Jesus tells them that He is the sword that brings division and that the person who attempts to preserve and secure his/her own life, will lose it. Jesus even says that His followers will earn a cross. This gets our attention, because up to this point in Matthew's Gospel, there has not been one mention of a cross. Without an indication that even Jesus will be crucified, here is Jesus telling us that if we are faithful in our following, crucifixion is our reward. (Will Willimon, "Disruption," Pulpit Resource, June 22, 2008)

This is tough stuff for those of us who prefer to think of Jesus as the One who promotes peace and blesses our families. Instead of daring disciples, it would seem that we have evolved into a follow-ship that is synonymous with being sensitive, compassionate and caring Americans. It is a way to follow Jesus without the threat of being hurt so that Jesus is exalted as the One who keeps our families together, anoints our highest values and blesses our best institutions. (Willimon)

But this is not the challenge that Jesus gives. Rather, this is the gospel where Jesus refuses to claim or be claimed by His own biological family. We should take note that Jesus' definition of family is one that is made up of those who hear the word of God and do it. (Luke 8:21) This is also the gospel that begins with an enraged King Herod who wields the sword to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Therefore, we should be terrified to hear Jesus say that He did not come to bring peace, but to bring a sword instead. Gary Walling says of this:

<We> are not called to retreat from the world...or to cower in the face of the hostility exhibited in our culture. The church is commissioned to be bold. That boldness may mean that, from time to time, it is called to do battle on behalf of those who are oppressed, hungry, sick, or in prison. We are called to have such a thirst for justice that it is simply not an option to remain on the sidelines while the large issues of our day are decided. The sword of which Jesus speaks is a metaphor for passion which we are called to hold for God's ways. We may have to answer someday for the things we have done in our lives which broke the peace, but we may also have to answer for the times we allow the peace to be preserved at the cost of justice. ("The Christian Sword," June 22, 2008, The Minister's Annual Manual)

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The prophet Jeremiah understood this. Called to be a spokesman for God, there were times when Jeremiah would rather have been quiet. After all, he had been mocked and ridiculed, thrown into

cisterns and imprisoned. He was hoping that if he could just keep his mouth shut, then he could live a

simpler, happier life. The only problem was that when he silenced himself, his calling and the messages of God would burn within. He said, "There is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." This fire kept Jeremiah from being hung up in the middle. Instead, "zzzzz," Jeremiah followed the line of God's directives right to the end.

Fred Shuttlesworth, initiator of the Civil Rights Movement here in Birmingham, also knew the fire of which Jeremiah speaks and the sword of which Jesus speaks. Unwilling to be happy in a white man's land and content with any treatment that a white man gave, Shuttlesworth determined that as went the civil rights struggle in Birmingham, so would go its success throughout the South and ultimately the nation. He began to hold nightly meetings at the Bethel Baptist Church. After three bombings, one of which detonated beneath the bedroom in which he was sleeping, the undaunted Shuttlesworth moved his meetings to other churches. Attracted to his "country preaching" style with an occasional penchant for "whooping," the citizens of Birmingham swarmed to attend. They needed encouragement to complete the journey for equal rights, equal opportunities, the right to vote and not remain caught up in the middle feeling dissatisfied, distraught, and defeated.

For several consecutive weeks, the Birmingham Fire Department was sent to these meetings as our city's instrument of harassment and intimidation. The wail of their sirens would drown out the voices attempting to speak from the pulpit of the St. James Baptist Church. Firefighters

would rush into the sanctuary, wielding hoses and axes, and ostensibly search for a fire. The fire was always nonexistent, but their presence would achieve the purpose of disrupting the gathering.

So on one particular night, Shuttlesworth stood to confront the firefighters. "Gentlemen," he said. "What are you looking for? Y'all think it's a fire in here? You know there ain't no fire here. The kind of fire we have in here, you can't put out with hoses and axes!" (Andrew M. Manis, "A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Meanings of Fred Shuttlesworth and His Movement," The Whitsett Journal, Spring, 2008) In his words, I hear echoes of: "I have a fire shut up in my bones!" "I have come not to bring peace, but to wield a sword!"

Jeremiah said, "There is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." This fire kept Jeremiah from being hung up in the middle.

We are taught over and over again that the gospel is not a

flashlight but a fire! The gospel is not a table knife but a sword! (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Family Values," Gospel Medicine) The gospel is not a feel good, ol' time religion! Rather the gospel is a fire burning in our bones; a sword that is divisive and cutting; a call to take a stand rather than being hung up in the middle.

Before completing my vacation, I spent a few days on the beaches of Alabama. It was oddly quiet our first day, but the second day, things picked up considerably as a Baptist youth group from Texas arrived and filled all the empty spaces in the fifteen story condominium in which we found ourselves. We endured slow elevators full of teens slathered with sunscreen. We listened to the girls squeal as the boys taunted them with sea weed and jelly fish. We watched as they had evening devotionals on the beach. And on their last afternoon, as most swam in the ocean, I noticed that the chaperones were asking certain teens to join them for a walk on the beach. The one-on-one intentionality of these walks was not lost on me. I knew that the young people who had been singled out were those who had not made public professions of faith. It was these chaperones' jobs to present the plan of salvation and officially bring them into the family of God.

As a pair sat down right in front of me, I watched with curiosity. I remembered years of youth retreats where I had done similar things. There was the talking, head nodding, and when the chaperone placed her hand on the teenage girl's shoulder, I knew they were praying. I found it a bit odd that they had not found a quieter, more private place for such a significant conversation. Perhaps that is why I noticed the laughter coming from behind me. A family of eight was also watching the same exchange as I and they found it to be laughable. Maybe they had been out in the sun too long. Maybe church and faith were antiquated commodities for them. Maybe God had become like a raisin under the car seat...there, but forgotten. (John Updike) They were, however, just "churchie" enough to recognize what was happening, yet they laughed.

Sitting literally in the middle—between the jesters and the convert—I found that I wanted to stand up and wield the sword. I wanted to send it diving into the midst of the scoffers, yea even in the midst of my own judgment and put to silence the laughter and derision found there. But I also wanted to send that sword sailing between the counselor and teen. Was there integrity in what was being explained in taking up this cross of Jesus? Would the harnesses be secure? Would the pulleys hold tight to launch this young woman on a journey of faith that would be so courageous she might find herself with a fire shut up in her own bones about which she could not keep silent?

"zzzz" came the sound in my own heart and soul as I sat in an oh too familiar place for me, and I suspect for you as well, right in the middle...between the scoffers and the sanctified, between the clowns and the converts, between the mockers and those with a mandate.

You will be pleased to know that only one scream escaped from

my mouth that day in the rain forest. I made it safely across each line every time. It has caused me to pray that I will begin to live my faith as easily. In fact, as I consider all that is before us as a church and as individuals who have committed to take up the cross of Christ, I have begun anew to seek after the courage to "zzzz" follow the direct line of Christ with an open mind, willing hands and a discerning heart, so that the fear of missing the amazing journey overrides the fear of the risk or the fear of losing those we might have to leave behind in order to be

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wholly Christ's. It is the warning that Christ gives to those first disciples and it is the invitation He gives to us as well.

So what about you?
Who amongst us

dares to pick up the cross of Christ that is so like a sword...so like a fire burning in our bones...and will follow? Will you?