

[Readings: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; Psalm 40; Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53]

I have some good news. After a successful back surgery on Wednesday, our beloved Deacon Marion came home from the hospital on Friday. He is in good spirits and he thanks us for all the love and prayers we have sent his way. He will be out of commission for at least two weeks while he recovers with physical and occupational therapy. Thanks be to God. AMEN!

When confronted with this particular Gospel text, I am tempted to hum the theme song from the TV game show “Family Feud.” Once, I asked a priest friend of mine, “Jesus hits all of the intergenerational family feuds except one: Where are the fathers-in-law and the sons-in-law? Aren’t THEY feuding with each other?” He replied rather quickly, “They’re probably in their man-cave having a beer and watching the Big Game!”

The words of Jesus ring like an ominous prediction. The world IS ablaze right now. The pot of war and conflict in the Middle East, Africa, North and South Korea, China and Taiwan, Russia and Ukraine – Pope Francis is calling it “World War Three in small bits and pieces.” Scores of people – many innocent bystanders – are killed and hundreds are wounded. Businesses, schools, hospitals, places of worship and places of government are all ablaze.

Anger and violent responses can be seen in this country not only on the streets of our inner cities, but also in some of our own homes and neighborhoods, and among people calling themselves “Christian” and behaving like anything else BUT “Christian.” There are radical fanatics among Christians and Jews, not just among Muslims.

In the time of Jeremiah, 600 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, the City of Jerusalem and all of Israel were threatened by its neighbor, Babylon. When Jeremiah wisely suggests that the King Zedekiah surrender before a most likely invasion (which indeed happened), Jeremiah is labeled a traitor to his country and to his people. In our First Reading, those in religious and political authority persuade the king to torture Jeremiah and put him into a huge clay pot, partially filled with mud, and leave him for dead. If YOU’RE having a bad day, think of poor Jeremiah! He survived the cistern, but eventually would die by stoning at the hands of his former friends. Jeremiah was “on fire” with God’s call to repentance, conversion and commitment to discipleship.

That’s kind of like what Jesus is saying in today’s Gospel. Are YOU on fire with your faith? Prove it! Do something about it. Jesus is calling us to the “violence” of justice over complacency, holy zeal over indifference, unwelcomed prophetic speech

over the status quo. Do we have the wisdom, the courage and the strength to challenge the status quo in our lives, knowing that it will lead to division? We were given those gifts at our Confirmation. Most of the messages the true prophets spoke were unpleasant to hear: repentance, judgment, impending destruction, sin and the displeasure of God concerning His people's behavior. Jeremiah is an enduring prophet who experienced suffering because of his total commitment to God. Jeremiah lost family, friends and fellow compatriots because of that commitment.

Jeremiah was a great prophet and felt alone most of the time, but he kept going. He gave up his whole life to be a servant of the Lord. He knew that his purpose was great, but that doesn't mean that it was easy. Jeremiah's only joy had to be that which was found in his Lord.

Today's Second Reading reminds us that pain and suffering come to all of us, whether we are good or bad, rich or poor.

A middle-aged man was pushing an older man in a wheelchair into their synagogue for their Sabbath service. As he was pushing the wheelchair, he himself suffered a stroke. How many people do we know who are the primary caregivers, sacrificing most of their life and comfort for another, only to take ill themselves or die before their loved one does?

Once he recovered from his stroke, an effort that took several weeks, he said to his rabbi, "No good deed goes unpunished."

It's all about the attitude, isn't it? We see in life what we want to see. If you want to find ugliness, you will find plenty of it. If you want to find fault with life, you will find plenty of it. But the opposite is also true. If we search for beauty, for truth, and for goodness, we will find that too.

Most days, I feel like I'm on top of the world as a priest and as a pastor; other days, I feel like saying, "move over, Jeremiah, and make some room for me!" What makes the difference?

Faith. That's what brings you here every Sunday. You humble me and you inspire me by your presence here for Mass each week. I know some of your stories and the burdens that you carry that test your faith. Yet you still come.

We echo the words of the Psalmist in our Responsorial Psalm: "The Lord heard my cry. He drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp... He made firm my steps and he put a new song into my mouth, a hymn to our God... Many shall look on in awe and trust in the Lord."

You look on in awe at the mystery that takes place when God's Word is proclaimed and its message preached. You look on in awe at what happens at the altar when God Himself is called down on humble bread and wine to become Jesus Christ, real and present.

Our Second Reading reminds me of one of my most favorite images. Did you know that every time we gather for Mass in the Catholic Church, the whole Communion of Saints is with us? Imagine the Big House in Ann Arbor attached to the gathering area of this church. Imagine us walking through these church doors after Mass into the playing field of life, with hundreds of thousands of saints, and the souls of our faithful relatives who have gone before us cheering us on. You do not journey alone. Thousands are at your side and behind you.

We are indeed "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" cheering us on to persevere, to keep the faith, and to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

Households continue to be divided by the Gospel today. Parents may commit themselves to the Faith, while children wander away from it. One spouse embraces the Way; the other is skeptical, apathetic or even antagonistic. In our Domestic Church and in our world-wide Church there are found passionate commitment, simple sincerity, hesitation and doubt, and half-hearted membership.

Where are YOU on the spectrum? Passionate commitment? Simple sincerity? Plagued by hesitation and doubt? Half-hearted membership? We're not all on the same page. In the matter of faith above all others, free will remains paramount. The fire is blazing. Not all will choose to be kindled by it. The choice to believe or not believe, to act or not to act is yours. So, burn, baby, burn with a "Hunka-Hunka burning love" of Jesus Christ! AMEN!