

Frontline Responders

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O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him." But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers. - Jeremiah 20:7-13

Jesus said to the twelve apostles, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven." - Matthew 10:16-33

If we didn't know a few months ago, we all have some idea now of what is meant by the term frontline responder, or more generally frontline workers. They are paramedics, nurses and doctors, social workers, at-home care providers and morticians. Frontline workers include grocery store clerks, food service workers in nursing homes, those in law enforcement, janitors, truck drivers.

Many of these souls have done what they are now doing for years, but now, often more than before, they are putting themselves at greater risk. And we are seeing them more clearly and appreciatively. At 8pm each evening for a few months after our own pandemic began, the neighborhood around Ascension broke out in a cacophony of horns, bells, drums and cheers. It was a message of unified support for those on the front lines of the pandemic.

Little or none of this kind of boisterous support is shown for any of the many frontline responders who populate the Bible from beginning to end. In their times and places, they also waded into the chronic and life-threatening pandemic of the human condition. They went and said and did because they believed that God had called them to do so.

God's frontline workers in the Bible also put themselves at risk for the good of the whole. God calls them to address and mitigate the worst symptoms of our primordial pandemic: hypocrisy, indifference, double-standards, our talent for shaming and dehumanizing others by way of 'us' versus 'them.' God's frontline responders often allied themselves with outsiders. They advocated for those with no one else to speak for them. And they were rarely heralded. More often they were targeted by those invested in keeping things as they were and are.

One of God's frontline responders, a prophet named Jeremiah, is described in a recent scholarly introduction as "*a servant of God with little good news for his audience.*"¹ That audience had heard from the Lord through Jeremiah that their exile in Babylon was a consequence of their idolatry. Jeremiah's audience didn't want to hear it, and he wrote: "*I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me ... [even] my close friends are watching for me to stumble.*" Notice, though, how, amidst the derision, Jeremiah clings to his God: O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind ... [and] to you I have committed my cause."

Frontline responders are also arguably featured in today's gospel passage from Matthew. To better understand this text, we should know that in the first nine chapters of Matthew the mission is overwhelmingly embodied in and carried out by Jesus alone. A recap at the end of Chapter 9 explains: "*Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.*" (9:35)

Then, suddenly, as Chapter 10 opens, the disciples are included in and become critical to the mission. Notice how their inauguration as frontline responders sounds a lot like the recap of the mission of Jesus that I just read: "*Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.*" (10:1) Jesus then provides these twelve with a brief missions operations manual.

And then we come to today's text in which Jesus describes some of the likely outcomes of their ministries. Think of it as the troubleshooting and hazards section of the mission manual. "*I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues you will be hated by all because of my name.*"

But why would those who have been given divine authority to exorcise, heal and cure be met with such hate and violence? One credible answer, argued or assumed by many scholars, suggests that the persecution that Jesus anticipates here may reflect editorial additions that address the dire circumstances of Christians who were known to the gospel author or who would have been his first intended readers, several decades after Christ's ministry, death and resurrection.

In any case, according to tradition, all of these disciples whom Jesus is sending forth as frontline responders *did* experience all that Jesus describes here, and more. Eventually, traditions says, all of them other than Judas Iscariot were martyred. However deadly the world's chronic spiritual pandemic, and however much we are in need of mercy, healing and justice, the principalities and powers of the world always resist disruption.

Reading through to the end of the Gospel of Matthew, it dawns on us that this first inauguration of first responders in the mission of Jesus is meant to be carried forward and shared with others, others who will call on the name of Jesus and follow him. And so you and I must naturally ask about our participation as first responders in the ongoing mission of Jesus.

A number of you who are members of Ascension have been asking yourselves and more recently asking me about how we may or will be first responders in the current challenges of more effectively and faithfully addressing matters of race and class, disparities of wealth and privilege, and matters of law enforcement and accountability, all of which have erupted over the past month.

Maybe all of this seems like too much to take on: "*We don't want controversy.*" "*We don't have the wherewithal.*" "*It's too risky.*" Even if so, let us own that the mission Jesus begins to share with his disciples in Chapter 10 of Matthew is also our mission. The troubles and challenges are unique in our time but are only different manifestations of the same enduring pandemic.

I can imagine Jesus asking you and me where we see the front lines of his and our mission, in our own city and neighborhoods, our own parish and households. If we can answer that question, he will no doubt follow up by asking if you and I are willing to be frontline responders. Amen.

¹ Kugler, Robert and Hartin, Patrick, *Introduction to the Bible*, Eerdmans, 2008, p. 241