

Jeremiah 23: 23-32
Malachi 3: 1-4
Luke 12: 49-56

Words of Fire
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When my son Willy was very small, maybe 4 years old, we had a talk about the Norwich Police. One of their police cars went by the house with the siren going as it followed a rather speedy car down the road. “Who was that?” asked Willy. “That was the Norwich police.” “What were they doing?” “They were following that car, that was going too fast. They are going to stop them.” Then Willy asked, with excitement and a kind of joyful horror in his voice, “Will they shoot him?” “No,” I said in my calm Mama voice. “They don’t stop him and shoot him. They will give the driver a ticket, and he might have to go to a court and talk to a judge.” Then Willy announced eagerly, “And **then** they shoot them.” Somehow he needed life to be a little more exciting, a little more dramatic, there on Beaver Meadow Road.

Thank goodness that our lives here are relatively safe, our policemen are competent, and that we have reasonable ways of dealing with speeding on our streets. But when we turn from casual conversations with 4-year-olds to the deeper conversations on the well-being of our community, our nation, our world, we lose that sense of safety and predictability. We are not so sure that systems are in place to handle the wounds and tragedies and threats that beset us. A maternal voice offering calm and reason may not be what’s needed.

There is a word in the English language that was coined in the 18th century to refer to a person who was always lamenting over how bad life was and how much worse it was going to be, a person who was angry at the complacency of other voices, a person who predicted disaster. The word is “jeremiad.” And, yes, it gets its name from one of today’s prophets, Jeremiah. The name of the Hebrew prophet has come to mean “the source of bad news.” Many Christians today have problems reading the Hebrew Scriptures because they feel that those old books are full of “bad news” of one kind or another, and that they describe a God of wrath and judgment, whose words are like fire and hammers. Many Christians prefer to turn to the New Testament, where they will hear “Good News,” and comfort and uplifting words. But, today, what do we find there? Jesus speaking to the disciples about his impatience for the coming fire of God’s presence. We hear the shocking news that Jesus came, not to bring peace, but division. Even within families, people will be turning against each other because of Jesus. He urges us to look around so that we can see what is happening in the “present time.” I think that he sounds remarkably like...Jeremiah.

Disturbing and unappealing as Jeremiah’s predictions about disaster might be, history proved him right. That’s probably why his prophecies were saved and included in sacred Scripture. The prophets who dreamed comforting dreams and reassured the people that everything was going well were wrong. Soon after these words were spoken, the kingdom of Judah was defeated and Jerusalem was destroyed along with its temple and priests. Disturbing and unappealing as the words of Jesus may be, it seems that history has also proved him right. Christians have always experienced disagreement and division. We know this from reading the letters of Paul written in the first century and from reading history books and from looking around today. At times, there could be a limited consensus over certain issues or at least a mutually accepted range of disagreement. But peace on

earth, even on a small patch of earth, seems to elude us. How can Jesus' words about fire and division be understood as part of the Gospel, the "Good News" that we are to hear and share?

Today the Scriptures tell us that listening to God involves making hard choices. It tells us that the coming of the Lord brings a scorching, purifying fire. Jesus tells us to "judge for ourselves what is right." Devotion to God means turning away from false prophets and listening to Jeremiah. OK. So will someone please tell me who are the false prophets and who are the prophets of God, in some of the pressing issues of our day? How will we know? How will history look back at us: what is the crisis that stares us in the face but is ignored or smoothed over for our present comfort? News reports are full of people acting and speaking from religious conviction. How can we judge for ourselves what is the fire of the word of God and what is a false dream?

It's an interesting image, fire. In mythology, in literature, in our own lives, fire is loaded with meaning. It is so basic to human life – to cooking, to industry, to agriculture – and yet so mysterious. All of us can think of times when a fire felt so good: a bonfire or a wood stove when we were cold. How many of you can remember that feeling? And how many of you can remember being burned by a campfire or a wood stove or an oven? Our most basic sensations of pleasure and pain are brought to mind by fire. All of us can think of stories in the Bible where fire played a central role. God seemed to use fire when he really wanted to get people's attention. So it became a metaphor for the holiness and power of God.

What does divine fire do? A number of things. It illuminates, revealing things that were hidden. It burns off things we don't need, as chaff used to be burned once wheat was gathered so that the kernels would be edible. It purifies, as ore is heated to bring out precious metal. It can renew, as blueberry fields are sometimes burned to make them more productive. It cleanses, as the tools of a physician are sterilized in heat. It ignites warm feeling of love, so that we care for our sisters and brothers. It can destroy and it can renew.

So when Jesus starts talking about fire and division, we had better start thinking about these challenging words. Look around: if the world were a place of pure goodness and unspoiled beauty, a place where all people flourish, a place of justice for all, then Jesus' statements would be not only troubling, but harmful. But, if the world has been scarred and marred by our actions, if violence is commonplace, if systems are unfair and unsustainable, then something has to be illuminated, refined, renewed, cleansed and ignited. Without confronting and dissecting the diseases, we cannot heal. Jesus came not to shake up a perfect world, but to strike at those structures that stifle life. And this is the root of the division he predicts. And the challenge for us, as his followers, it to be more than arsonists: to be stewards of the dangerous freedom given to us by God.

Last June, I attended with Avery Post and Chipper Ashley, the annual meeting of the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ in Randolph. A lot goes on for a day and a half: a lot of worship, a lot of workshops, a lot of business. It is tightly scheduled. Our church was presenting a resolution to reduce gun violence, but, somehow, not much time was scheduled for the presentation and discussion of this contentious and critical issue. Our local church delegation needed to work with those running the meeting to carve out time to hear from various people on all sides of the question. I believe that each person who spoke did so out of deep Christian faith and concern. There was, frankly, disagreement. Some of the words were eloquent and fiery. But we kept at it. And I have to commend everyone involved. It takes courage to moderate a discussion like that. It takes courage to step in front of a microphone before a couple of hundred people and voice what

seems to be a minority opinion. It takes courage to believe that informed people can judge for themselves what is right. On one level, the division that Jesus spoke of was there. On the other hand, because it was a safe place for this kind of division, people were more likely to hear and understand and care about each other. There were no slogans, no bumper stickers, and no sound bites. We were able to talk. Then, we were able to vote. Then, we were still speaking to one another.

Here, in this church, we are fortunate. We don't have to communicate through sound bites or picket signs. We have the opportunity to create safe places for division. We can read God's fiery words from the pulpit and allow them to ignite our hearts, to spur us on to lives of greater devotion and action. Then we can turn to our neighbors and hear how God has spoken in their lives. We may be shocked or dismayed at the story of their faith journey. Their Gospel may not sound like Good News to us, at first hearing. They may sound like they are living in a dream world, like Jeremiah's false prophets. But we are fortunate because it does not have to end there. We are gifted with resources of communal worship, with care for each other that transcends disagreements, and with sincere concerns about the wider world. Just as those people at the Conference meeting were trusted to use their hearts and their thoughts and their time together to come to good decisions, we can be trusted to use our resources well. It is through God's grace that we have these gifts to use. And it is with God's grace that they will bear fruit.

Because we are so blessed with these opportunities for sharing and discernment, we are also charged with great responsibility. We cannot claim ignorance or helplessness in the face of the world's pain and injustice. Earlier I asked what crisis confronted us with moral responsibility: what is our present equivalent of Jeremiah's situation? When people look back in years to come, what will be our sin of omission? What burns in our hearts like a fire or hits us in the gut like a hammer? We can list our concerns... Is it the proliferation of gun violence in our nation? Is it the plight of children of incarcerated people? Is it the degradation of the environment? But until we speak and listen to each other, divided though we may be, we cannot take on the responsibility of working for the coming kingdom of God.

What good news can we take with us today from the Scriptures? That God continues to bless us in times of division and pain. That God's words are like a hammer, that breaks down and builds. That God's words are like fire, that burns and that warms.

We might pray that such a fire burned in all of our hearts.

- Fire to illuminate our dark world
- Fire to burn off the dross
- Fire to renew the landscape
- Fire to bring out the purity of the gold and silver within us
- Fire to inflame people to care for and to bless one another with all the gifts of faith
- Fire to purify our speech
- Fire to consume the altars of our false gods
- Fire to lead our people through the darkness, through the wilderness.

And so we will truly become a church, a family of people who can use the fire, can see the weather, and judge for ourselves what it right. Amen.