

The Fire of Christ
Jeremiah 23:23-29 Luke 12:49-59
August 18, 2019

This morning's reading from Luke is a disturbing one. In it Jesus is saying things that are uncomfortable for us to hear. He talks about bringing fire to earth, causing division between people – even within families, and wishing the fire he brought was already kindled. This sounds pretty intense, and it doesn't seem to fit in with the way we usually see Jesus. Most of the time we think of Jesus as bringing people together. When we think of Jesus' impact on the world, we imagine happy scenes like circles of people holding hands, smiling at one another, and singing *Kumbaya*. We long for agreement, for commonality, for harmony. We are not happy with the divisions and disagreements that keep popping up in our families, our communities and in the world at large, so it is difficult to get our minds wrapped around the idea that Jesus might be at the root of some of these disagreements.

I used to think that fire, particularly forest fires, were a bad thing. Except for in small controlled circumstances such as a wood stove or campsites, I saw fire as dangerous. But certain varieties of trees, notably some species of pine in the United States, depend on the heat of a fire to melt the resin that seals their cones. Fire is needed to release their seeds and begin the process of growing new trees. It took time for those who manage forests and wild areas to recognize that fires are essential to the health and well being of the forests. It can be hard to watch nature take its course, especially when it means allowing a beautiful forest to burn. But if we don't allow the forest to burn, then the pines cannot rejuvenate themselves. When we didn't allow wildfires to burn at all, dead wood and underbrush built up. They matted and choked out new life on the forest floor, so that when fires ignited they did much more damage than they would have under naturally occurring conditions.

I use this example because when Jesus wishes the fire he has brought would start, I believe he is longing for the kind of fire that burns off dead wood. He wants to get rid of the undergrowth that threatens to choke out new life. Metaphorically speaking, Jesus wants to get rid of the outdated religious and political structures that stand in the way of the new life he came to offer to anyone who would receive him. In his fire he wants to refine the people who keep holding onto the old ways, those who refuse to make room for the resurrection. We all know that in order for there to be a resurrection, there first needs to be a death, a letting go of that which no longer serves, and then a turning around, which is known as *repentance* in religious language. All of this is difficult. It was hard for the people of Jesus time, and it is hard for us as well. We don't like letting go of what is familiar to us, and even moreso, we don't like letting go of the upper hand when we have it. Repentance is not fun and neither is being refined in the fire of God.

Jesus is honest when he proclaims that he has come to bring division to the earth. He knows that even families will disagree with one another because of the things he is teaching. When we read the Bible, we are aware that Jesus stirred things up during his own lifetime, but it is hard when we experience how he is still stirring things up today. Jeremiah chimes in here with a helpful, if still unsettling word. He points out that there have been false prophets from the beginning of time, people who said whatever they thought would capture the most attention and get the most followers. Some of these false prophets did everything they could to turn people away from God, and yet, as Jeremiah points out, God's word is like a fire that cannot be quenched. Jeremiah and other prophets speak of this as a refiner's fire, that is a fire that burns off the dross, the waste, leaving only the purified metal behind. This refining process is what all of the prophets, and Jesus as well, was hoping for in their

listeners, that we would let God's fire move over us and through us, burning off anything that got in the way of us building a true and honest relationship with God.

Jeremiah talks about how the false prophets keep clamoring for attention, and how so many people keep listening to them, blindly following along, and doing whatever they are told to do. Jesus chastises people for not recognizing the signs of the times. He points out how ironic it is that we can tell what kind of weather is coming just by watching the skies for clouds or noticing which direction the wind is blowing, and yet we don't seem to understand the signs of the times that are all around us. *"When you see a cloud forming in the west, you immediately say, 'It's going to rain.' And indeed it does. And when a south wind blows, you say, 'A heat wave is coming.' And it does. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret conditions on earth and in the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret the present time?"*

When I read this and let it sink in, I can't help but reflect on the news. There are so many disturbing things going on in so many areas right now, so many hot topics coming at us from every angle - immigration, racism, poverty, mass incarceration, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, droughts, floods, forest fires. I am sure you can add to this list of the overwhelming issues that we face in our time. How are we supposed to interpret all of this? Every single one of these issues is burning through our culture right now, and if you are like me, you are trying really hard to figure out where God is in it all. What does God want of us, what does God require of us, really, in the midst of such painfully difficult and divisive times? Well, first of all, we have to separate out the false prophets from those who are speaking the truth. This is proving to be a very difficult thing to do when we are not sure whom to trust. What is true, what is false and how can we tell the difference? We can't investigate every single event or news story for ourselves, so how can we discern the truth? When so many people are clamoring for our attention on every side of the issues, how can we tell what side God is really on? I wish it were as easy as asking ourselves "what would Jesus do in this situation?" or "what is true in God's eyes?" and getting a clear answer in a voice speaking from the clouds or written in the Bible.

The reality of faith is that we have to go through the refiner's fire ourselves, and only after we have undergone this process can we begin to understand what it is God might be saying to us in the midst of the world's chaos. We have to place ourselves in God's hands and let God change us, even though this change may not be what we want. It may be painful, as change so often is. It may turn us around to see new perspectives that we are not comfortable with. It may change us into someone we don't even know. When I was young, I thought that being a Christian meant I was supposed to be polite, not to disagree with anyone and to smile a whole lot, even when I didn't feel like smiling. But the truth is that being a Christian means following Jesus, and Jesus takes us to a lot of places that no one in their right mind would go. Following Jesus means that we may find ourselves doing things we never imagined ourselves doing, speaking up in situations when we would normally have sat silently. God's refining fire burns away the parts of us that get in the way of living a Christ-centered life, but this may not look like we think or even want it to look. God is capable of surprising us at every turn. The question is, are we willing to let the fire of Christ burn through us?

God of fire, your holy flame burns within us. Refine us in the fire of your love. Make us into the people you need us to be here and now. May we recognize your voice among all of the voices clamoring for our attention. May we follow you, holding true to your holy flame, following Jesus always. Amen.