



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

When God Has a Bad Day Jeremiah 23:23-29; Luke 12:49-56

As we heard earlier in our Old Testament reading, speaking on behalf of God, the prophet Jeremiah asks a rhetorical question: "Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off?" (Jeremiah 23:23) The intended answer is "No!" for this far off God sees all and knows all from his lofty position above the world and humanity. In this passage, God sees the false prophets of Judah who pacify the people, speak on behalf of false gods, and refuse to announce God's judgment. They dream dreams but do not speak the truth of God. His people have followed other gods, made unwise alliances, and failed to be faithful. Therefore, according to Jeremiah, the true prophet is to speak God's word which he describes in frightening terms: "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29)

Speaking to the original question posed by God and the destructive power of God's word, one commentator said, "Perhaps it's for the best that this God stay away from us."¹

Of course, over six centuries preceding the birth of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah did not know what we know today: God is not far off! God is very much near by. And it seems that this same angry, vengeful God shows up in the person of Jesus, at least on one occasion as Luke tells the story. Luke recounts how, after a teaching session that included questions and answers, at some point, Jesus became agitated or maybe aggravated. It may have been, as Jesus himself suggests, that he became stressed out over the mission that was before him. Listen to Luke's report:

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father

¹Elizabeth Palmer, "Living By the Word: August 14, 2016, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, *The Christian Century* (August 3, 2016): 18.

against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Luke 12:49-56

Such scathing rhetoric sounds uncharacteristic of Jesus, the same one who, John tells us said, "Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27). Why, if we read back a few verses earlier, we discover Jesus telling the crowd not to be anxious about what they would wear or eat. He reminded them that God clothes the flowers of the field and feeds the birds of the air, so there is no need to fret over basic needs.

He continues speaking and addresses the issue of the coming day of the Lord when God will judge the earth, definitely a frightening idea to many people. Even so, he is still rather practical and encouraging. He reminds his listeners to be prepared by doing what they know they should do. That is to say, be faithful and diligent in your responsibilities and do not take advantage of other people, both those people who have authority over you and the ones over whom you have authority. Do what you are supposed to do. Be fair and just. And you will be ready whenever God arrives.

Then suddenly, it seems, for whatever reason, his mood changes--drastically. It is as if Jesus is having a bad day and letting everyone know it. His hands, which are clenched at his sides, shake. His voice quivers with emotion. His face reddens and he spews forth a tirade that makes you think Jeremiah's God has suddenly come near.

We do not often hear Jesus talk in these tones. Most of his teachings are hopeful and encouraging. Even when he takes on the scribes and Pharisees, we don't feel the heat of his wrath blowing on us. Maybe that is the problem. The people—the regular folks to whom he always spoke—were not paying attention and Jesus was fed up. Perhaps we don't pay attention either.

The truth is that Jesus did come near by to bring fire to earth, a fire that purges the spirit of unrighteousness and burns off the injustice that is common among us. He offers peace, to be sure, but it is a peace that the world does not know. He brings fire to purify his people and make us like him.

Jesus' parables, his sermons, his simple answers to the complex questions we all have, directed the white-hot heat of his light on sinful attitudes and behaviors. He rebuked the religious leaders for the arrogance of their religiosity. He pointed out the hypocrisy of bloodthirsty mobs who would punish others for their sin while ignoring their own. He called people to repentance and urged them to sin no more. He called them on the carpet about their greed, their neglect of the poor, their inhospitality toward the stranger, the ways they ostracized people who were ill, their tendency for quick judgement and their hesitancy toward forgiveness. It was like a fire that scorches a field, burning everything in its path, clearing the way for new growth unimpeded by weeds and thorns.

Why should we hear such a tirade nearly 2000 years later? Probably because we are like many of those first century folks who simply did not get what Jesus was teaching. We do not treat all people with dignity and kindness. We do not offer hospitality to the stranger. We do not make choices that tend toward life and avoid the ones which lead to death. We do not live the gospel day by day. I certainly don't and I doubt you do either. Apparently, when we do not live up to the Gospel we have claimed, it can make God mad and cause God to have a bad day.

I think of times when I am under a lot of stress and it feels as if more things are getting piled on top with each tick of the clock. Like Jesus, my stress comes spewing out, not very eloquent, but highly emotional. Jesus was dealing with the stress of his "baptism," a baptism that would not take place in the Jordan River; instead, it would happen in the court of Pilate and on the hill of Calvary. He knew that he was facing persecution, torture, and death. And for what? For three years he had been teaching the people about the kingdom of God that was already in their midst. All they had to do was discover it and live it; yet, few people, including his disciples, had actually grasped what he was talking about.

On this particular day, in an uncharacteristic display of fiery passion, Jesus tried a different approach to get the people's attention. He pointed out that because of his mission, his ministry among them, the world would be upset. Not everyone would like the direction the Gospel takes. Even families

would feel the pinch when divisions erupted because not everyone would agree on what is right and what is wrong. People would argue, disagree, and fight. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago when I told you that the two taboo topics at any family gathering are politics and religion. It is true, and yet, these two topics are probably the two most important subjects in our lives. How we live together in community and how we live out our faith are critical issues for us--or they should be, but we cannot talk about them because our talk so often results in division and an absence of peace.

When Jeremiah spoke on behalf of God, he spoke of a God of distance and wrath, a God whose judgement resulted in punishment. That is why he spoke of God as a scorching fire and smashing hammer. Eventually even Jeremiah came to experience God as the source of hope for the people of Israel and for all the world.

That is why God came near to us in the person of Jesus Christ. God wants us to understand that he is not far away, but is near, very near. And he wants us to live in such a way that reflects God's personality. Speaking out of his characteristic sense of dualism, the Apostle Paul amplifies what Jesus was telling his hearers:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Galatians 5.19-26

The near God whom we know through Jesus Christ calls us to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are not easy virtues to live, but they are possible when this nearby God purifies us of the dross of our sinful ways. When we pay attention to Jesus and begin to follow him, we discover that the path, though never easy, is well marked and traveled by people around us.

We do not have to live divided. God in Christ brings a purifying fire that can bring us together, but we do have to think with compassion and act with justice. When we do that, we can learn to disagree without desiring harm to the other. We learn how to talk and exchange ideas without having to push our particular position on someone else. We learn to accept one another and ourselves as daughters and sons of God. We allow God to purify our lives and guide us in living because we discover, as Henry Sloan Coffin said, “The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.” May it be so for us all—and for God! Amen.

August 14, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Blessed are you, O God, for you have created our world and filled it with good things. The heavens above declare your glory and the earth below testifies to your creativity. And we, O God, bear witness to your love which has fashioned us, redeemed us, and dwells with us. With all that we have and out of all that we are, we offer our praise to you.

We are grateful to gather here today as your people. We are thankful for our brothers and sisters who sit on all sides of us, supporting and encouraging us, and offering us opportunity to do the same. We are thankful for the life of this congregation and what it means to us and this community. Continue to enrich our relationships with one another and especially with you. Guide us in our ministries and focus us in our worship. Enable us to be a haven for those seeking respite from life's storms as well as a point of departure for missions of mercy.

As we do day by day, we offer our prayers for those who need your help, O God. Some of our friends suffer from strong illnesses which sap them of energy and life. Some struggle with burdens that they can no longer lift alone. Some wake each day to a piercing pain while others move slowly with a persistent dull ache of body or spirit or mind. Some of us are lonely while others worry over friends who are hurting. Some face an uncertain future while others worry over the past. Our needs are varied, O God. In the unexplainable but quite tangible mercy of your Spirit, move within us and help us, we pray.

We also rejoice in the goodness with which you have blessed us, O Lord. For times of rest and refreshment, we offer our thanks. For good work and vigorous play, we are grateful. For time spent with family, for opportunities to be with friends, and for time alone we whisper our gratitude and appreciation for the many ways you have enriched us in these past weeks. Bless us now as we resume schedules that will carry us over the months ahead. May our teaching and learning, our commerce and consumption, our work and our play, and especially our worship and service bring blessing to us and all with whom we interact. May every act be praise and every thought be prayer for the grace of your goodness. These and all of our prayers we offer in faith through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.