

Time after Pentecost
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August 19, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Psalm 82;
Hebrews 11:20-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's been interesting to try to figure out exactly what I was going to say about our lessons for today. If any of you took a look at the Daily Lectionary listing in last week's "Trinity Today", which provides an overview of the appointed bible readings for the following week, you would have seen this Sunday's texts described as follows: Jeremiah 23 - "God's word is like fire." Luke 12 - "Jesus brings fire on earth."

And a few minutes ago, we all heard the actual harsh words from scripture summarized in those descriptions. "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord?" Jesus saying, "I came to bring fire to the earth"!

There are few things in life I fear more than fire. My stomach always does a couple of flips when I see a fire engine flying down the road or hear screaming sirens. I read newspaper stories about fires with horror. And I'm paranoid enough about fire that I've been known to get in my car, drive off to work in the morning and turn around a couple of miles later to go back and make sure that I, in fact, did unplug my curling iron, even though I know I checked it three times before I left.

I've never been in a fire or had anything destroyed by it, so I don't know why I fear it so much. I guess it's just the knowledge that fire is so utterly violent when it comes.

I can't believe I'm the only one around who has these feelings about fire. Otherwise, CNN and FoxNews and MSNBC wouldn't spend hours of their broadcast days breathlessly telling us listeners sensational stories about the wildfires in California that are threatening hundreds of homes or one in Montana that has burned thousands of acres of forest.

A lifetime of possessions doesn't stand a chance against flames. I shudder to think of all those irreplaceable things we have - photographs, letters, souvenirs of people and places - that can be wiped out in a flash. And of course there's the cost in human lives -- the child who never will see another birthday, the father who never will watch his children grow up because smoke and flames have snuffed life out.

Oh, we can do things to protect ourselves from this force. We can teach our children not to play with matches. We can buy smoke detectors and install sprinkler systems and make sure we unplug our curling irons. But, we're never completely in control. Just talk to someone who was a victim of a fire, someone who learned first hand that all the resources at our disposal - all the fire fighters and helicopters and water and knowledge in the world - couldn't stop the destruction of thousands of acres of forests and houses and highways - couldn't prevent lives from being turned completely upside down.

Strange then, aren't they, the words we hear today? We, who are used to hearing words of good news spoken to us through bible stories - words of God's steadfast love and gracious forgiveness – today we hear disturbing words. The Prince of Peace, about whom the angels sang, that tiny baby in a manger of Christmas, that teller of touching parables like the one about the Prodigal Son - today this one says "I came to bring fire to the earth." I came to unleash a force - a force that will shake up your world - that has the power to disrupt all that you know and hold dear - that you, you humans, can't contain - that will change the face of the earth.

I have to be honest. I don't really want to hear this kind of talk right now, maybe ever. We're coming to the end of the summer. This is a time of relaxation and refreshment, the time when families are going off for vacation and enjoying one another. School may be starting soon, but the days are still long, there's still time to play in the ocean and frolic in the backyard and gather friends for some hamburgers on the grill. It's a nice time of year.

And yet, here we are this morning, confronted with what seem to be death-giving, not life-giving words. I'm reminded of an animated video I once watched with my confirmation students back on internship in Nebraska. It was a video put out by a fundamentalist religious group about what the end times would be like according to their vision. One of the scenes portrayed Jesus, sitting up on his throne in heaven. . . shooting fireballs to the earth. The fireballs were, of course, destroying everything in their path, while the humans left behind – the people who didn't believe in the "right things", who hadn't been taken up to heaven – were running around in terror with nowhere ultimately to hide from the Lord's wrath and judgment.

Pretty dramatic stuff, huh? But somehow, I just don't believe that that's really what today's readings are all about. If all they were meant to do was scare and intimidate us, make us fear our fates and dread what lies before us, then they really would be death-giving words.

But I think there's a lot of good news for us to hear today. Because today we are reminded that God in Jesus has the power to shake things up, to disrupt the status quo, to challenge and change human lives, to transform a world so in need of transformation.

Maybe you and I here at Trinity Lutheran in Central PA remain a bit sheltered from a lot of the really rough stuff going on in the world right now. No buses on the Camp Hill Mall to Lemoyne route have been blown up by terrorists during rush hour. There aren't starving refugees from the war in Sudan living in tents in our church parking lot, hoping that someone will take pity on them. Our neighborhoods don't consist of houses that are full of two years' worth of mold from Hurricane Katrina and people trying to rebuild their lives in a FEMA trailer park on the corner.

But you and I are called to recognize and respond to that brokenness in the world, just as we are called to recognize and respond to the brokenness right around us – the family down the street all of a sudden struggling to pay their bills, a drug-infested neighborhood across the river in Harrisburg, conflict within our own families, a resentment we just cannot seem to let go of.

For while this brokenness is part of our reality, it's not the dream of God for the world and for us. God's dream, his vision for creation -- is a vision in which all people know his name. It's a vision in which all people are fed, bombs don't kill, the homeless are sheltered, the weak are lifted up out of powerlessness. It's a vision in which those who for centuries have been pushed

to the margins of the community of faith - the teenage unwed mother, the person who doesn't look or act like the rest of us, the drug addict, the kid who hasn't "made it" - are welcomed in with open arms to experience the grace of God and to work in his kingdom.

This vision doesn't come cheap. It doesn't come about without sacrifice, commitment, energy, risk. There is a price to be paid. We have to allow the fire of God's word to jolt us out of our complacency, to shake us up. We have to allow the fire of God's word to destroy our hatreds and prejudices, to shape us and refine us so that God's vision becomes our vision; His dream becomes our dream for the world.

There is a decision to be made. For in love, God gives each of us a choice. He will not force us to join the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, the one we heard described by the writer of Hebrews this morning. God gives us room to protect ourselves, so that we can be alert to the first small flickers of discomfort and controversy that come when the gospel is proclaimed honestly - when the tough words of judgment against evil are spoken, when the demanding call to righteousness is issued, when we are challenged to love our enemies and to follow a man to a cross. We can be alert to those beginning flames in our lives and stamp them out.

But there is another choice - the choice to open ourselves up to the fire Jesus brought which was unleashed on us children of God at Pentecost - to get caught up in God's passion for creation.

It is risky. God's fiery word can cause confusion and change the course of our lives. It demands much of us, sometimes speaks to us of things we'd rather not hear. But, it holds so much promise. For in the end God's fiery word doesn't leave a pile of burned out rubble, the smoking shell of a life destroyed, a wasteland of ashes. No, in the end, it creates and gives new life. Joined to water in baptism, God's fiery word saves us from sin and death, unites us as Christ's body on earth. Joined to the bread and wine of communion, God's word feeds, strengthens, forgives us. Joined to our breath in our speaking, God's word has the power to make his gracious love known and to give birth to his vision for creation.

I probably will never get over my fear of fire, so I'll continue to compulsively check whether I've unplugged my curling iron and turned off my stove and blown out my scented candles. But I will also continue to do this - I will continue to pray for God to set me and you on fire for ministry - for no matter who we are, or where we are in our life journey, our words and deeds can make a difference. Thanks be to God. Amen.