

Sermon for Proper 15, Year C

[Jeremiah 23:23-29](#); [Psalm 82](#); [Hebrews 11:29-12:2](#); [Luke 12:49-56](#)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was a child and I needed to learn something, I would walk to the bookcase in the dining room and pull down one of the volumes of the 1967 Encyclopedia Americana. I suppose I am part of the last generation to think of an encyclopedia as a set of hefty books, and not a website. I was an inquisitive child, and so I spent a lot of time in that encyclopedia, racing from article to article, exploring the world through my imagination. And after hundreds of visits to that bookcase, one day, it registered with me that there was something a little strange about our particular set -- a few of the books bore titles in silver letters, but most of the visible spines were lettered in a golden color that was really quite lovely to look at. I asked my mother, that afternoon, why the set was labeled in different colored ink. She told me it had all been silver once, but that when she was young, not long after buying the set, her house had caught fire. Among the things saved, in the aftermath, were the encyclopedias, but the heat and smoke had left their mark on most of the set, the letters forever golden from the fire.

Fire is much on our minds this morning, appearing in all three of our readings. Jesus, in the Gospel passage, is most direct about it, opening with the unwavering honesty we have come to expect from him -- "I came to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" There is a testy quality to these words, a sense of impatience. At this point in Luke 12, Jesus has been holding forth for some time, addressing a crowd of thousands. He has implored them to be unwavering in their faith, he has pleaded with them to set aside their obsessions with material wealth, and he has admonished them that they must be watchful, for the hour is coming when much will be demanded of them. Surely the crowd was beginning to fidget -- was this the man who had fed five thousand and cast out illness and evil spirits? What did he mean by making all these demands? And Jesus, sensing their apprehension, like any good teacher, shakes them up -- do they think he has come to bring them comfort? No, no. He has come to set them on fire.

Fire has come to be a common Christian image -- to those familiar with enough Biblical stories, it may make us think of Moses and the burning bush that spoke with the voice of God, or the pillar of fire that led the Israelites by night out of wilderness, or the tongues of flame upon the heads of the apostles at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended. But it is also a violent image, isn't it? An unsettling one, for anyone who has survived a fire. And Christ is not done unsettling us. The one we so often call the Prince of Peace tells those around him that his coming brings division to the earth, and not peace -- that families will crack under the strain of what lies ahead. What on Earth does he mean by these ominous words? Where is the gentle Jesus we so often find depicted in art and song?

I think of my own experience with fire -- as someone living in Spokane County, perhaps it's understandable that my closest encounter is with a wildfire. Last year, a fire unexpectedly ignited in brush less than a mile from our house in Cheney. The fire department responded rapidly, but there was

smoke everywhere and evacuation orders were rapidly issued. I remember hastening to the house with my four year old in the backseat of the car, ready to pick up my wife and flee the neighborhood. Planes buzzed loudly overhead, flying incredibly low over the rooftops, bringing water from nearby lakes. As we drove away from the house, tearfully unsure what the evening would bring, I remember reassuring my daughter, who kept asking anxiously what would happen. We would be okay, I told her. The most precious things from our house -- the people living in it -- were safe. We would stick together, and if the fire came for what we left behind, so be it.

As it happens, our local firefighters kept the blaze in check, and by midnight we were back in our house. But I thought of that panicked flight this week, as I considered the readings. Fire refined my perceptions and my priorities that day. So many of the things I spend time and energy on were suddenly unimportant to me. Perhaps it is no shock, then, that Jesus, looking around at the crowd, knew that the fire was coming for them also, and wanted to fan those flames, not simply for what they would destroy, but for what they would inspire us to hold on to.

It can be painful to contemplate the losses that come with devotion to God, but I am grateful that Jesus describes them plainly. He is no carnival barker -- he is not interested in making a sale. He wants us to face the Truth. The lives of radical grace that God calls us to -- of selfless devotion, of dedication to the oppressed and the outcast -- will bring tension with some who are closest to us because the values of Christ's kingdom are not aligned with the values of this world. To take Jesus seriously is to take the prospect of that kind of division seriously. We can read the signs, as he reminds us. We know what may be lost in following him. So who would be so reckless? Who would take this risk, in the expectation of such grim consequences?

Maybe only someone touched by flames -- not engulfed by them so that the pain paralyzes, but painted by the encounter like the words on the spine of an encyclopedia set. For Jeremiah reminds us that the word of God is like fire, and in Christ we have met the Word made flesh. By human standards he should have been forgotten -- these words, spoken mere weeks before his execution as a condemned criminal, should have been lost. The fact that they have reached us today, across two millennia -- thanks in many respects to the bravery of those listening to him that day, many of whom lost family and fortune and even their own lives due to their belief in him -- reminds us that what he was anxious to kindle did, in fact, catch fire. Those words endured. The question that is left to us is simply this: will we be brave enough to respond to Christ's words? Can we hear him today and face the challenge he presents with courage?

That is what I face, myself. There are times when I am unsure of what God demands of me, but they are less frequent than I like to admit. Too often, I understand what I ought to do. I simply fear what it will mean to follow Jesus. Perhaps you have known the same fear.

Today's words from Hebrews remind us that we are not alone. So many people like us, throughout the ages, have heard the same voice call them, and have counted the same cost. By faith, they took action. Some experienced great tragedies -- torture, persecution, even painful death. Some experienced great

triumphs -- administering justice, finding strength in their weakness, even receiving the gift of life itself. The world was not worthy of them. And we are called to enter their ranks -- to leap to our feet, joining that great cloud of witnesses all sprinting onward in the race that Christ ran, to the cross. I cannot tell you, today, what it will mean to each of us, to run that race. I can only point to the promise that, if we step forward in faith, we will not be alone. So let us step forward together.

O God who fills heaven and earth, fill us, your people, with the fire we need to get moving, and the strength we need to run the race we know we are called to run, so that we can lay aside every weight and reach for that joy that you have set before us. Amen.