

“Making Room for a Little Fire of the Right Kind”
Jeremiah 23:23-29; Luke 12:49-56
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church Raleigh
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Some of you will know that the former Dean of the Wake Forest University Divinity School and friend to many of us, Bill Leonard, is originally from Texas. He came out of the moderate tradition of Texas Baptist life and has become more progressive than moderate over time, but his grandmother was an old-school, Texas Baptist fundamentalist. There are probably many ways to describe her perspective on faith, but the most concise way Bill ever put it was to say that her view of preachers was as follows – if he don’t sweat, I don’t listen!

Ironically, in technical terms, I would satisfy her criterion, because I have a runner’s metabolism, I sweat... but I would not match her expectations. A preacher who sweats is one who screams and shouts, passion is part of the equation, but the qualities needed most are guilt and judgment, fire and brimstone - let the sinners know they are sinners! A search committee member of a church where I was on staff years ago said the committee had heard a candidate who had a little fire in his preaching and then added that the church wanted a little fire. Actually, it didn’t, and the candidate that committee brought was not a good fit for the church, but everyone knew what it meant to have a little fire.

The thing is churches like ours tend to shy away from fire altogether. We tend to emphasize things like grace and love rather than judgment and guilt when we talk about the character of God and the identity of Jesus. And generally speaking, I’m glad that we do. Most people have enough brokenness and pain in their lives. What they need from religion is not more hardship but a way to healing and peace.

The trouble is there is a need for some fire of a certain kind. There are biblical passages, like those we have read today from Jeremiah and Luke, in which fire is used as an image for God’s word and Jesus’ mission. And if we are not careful, we may end up with an image of God and Christ that has no passion or strength; an image where our

Maker and Guide, our Savior and Lord, is just a passive encourager standing on the sideline of life and shouting glibly, “You’ve got this!”

Love is central to the character of God and encouragement is a good thing, but the God we know in Christ is more than this. God is vitally involved in this world, passionately pursuing love and justice, righteousness and peace. And fire is part of the equation. We just need to make sure that we are talking about the right kind of fire.

In the texts we have read today and elsewhere in scripture the fire attributed to God is not the kind that seeks to destroy. Some people think they want such a fire, not for themselves, of course, but for others they deem worthy of punishment. But it doesn’t work this way. God doesn’t work this way. Fire is not a weapon God uses to annihilate our enemies or God’s. There is such a thing as judgment, and scripture talks about God’s anger or wrath. But the ultimate purpose of God’s wrath is redemption, not punishment. Even when God abandons Israel to the consequences of the nation’s own decisions, and thus the nation falls to the Babylonians and is taken into exile, the ultimate goal is not destruction. It is a last-ditch effort to get the nation to repent.

Anyone who has experienced fire knows what a destructive force it can be. The apartment I lived in with my mother in Fayetteville when I was young caught on fire. Mother was cooking tater tots, grease got into the flame and the next thing I remember, firetrucks showed up to put out the fire. It was a terrifying experience for a young child. I did not eat tater tots for quite some time... But I remember that fire to this day, as I remember a time when I had to help a mother identify her adult daughter who had been killed in a fire. It is a fate I would not wish on anyone. It is a force I cannot imagine a God of love using as punishment.

The fire scripture attributes to God is not the kind that seeks to destroy but rather the kind that refines and purifies, the kind that expresses passion and commitment, the kind that ultimately redeems and transforms. We might think of the refiner’s fire used on precious metals like silver to separate out impurities. Or we might think of some ways fire is used in agriculture and in forestry. Some controlled burns are helpful and a layer of ash left by a planned fire can be rich in nutrients

while providing temporary control of pests and weeds. This is the kind of fire attributed to God. It refines and purifies us. It nurtures us and protects us from harm. It is not ultimately destructive.

In the reading from Jeremiah it is quite clear that the people need some refining. This prophet has been given the unenviable task of telling the nation that they are so far off-base from God's desire that, if they do not repent, God will abandon them and thus they will fall to a foreign power. Their sins run the gamut from mistreatment of the alien, the orphan and the widow all the way to theft, murder and idolatry.

They compound their trouble by presuming that as long as they show up for worship, it doesn't matter how they live, how they conduct business, how they treat other people (Jeremiah 7). And to make matters even worse, they have court prophets and priests, people like Hananiah son of Azzur (Jeremiah 28), who tell them that what they are doing is fine with God. They don't need to listen to the wild-eyed prophet who speaks of doom and gloom, the prophet they ridicule every way they can, calling him every name in the book. Neither Facebook nor Twitter invented the human capacity for meanness!

By the time we join Jeremiah in today's reading, the prophet has had about all he can take, and God has had about all God can take. The false prophets can talk all they want about their visions and dreams that provide cover for the misdeeds of the people and their leaders, but the true prophet will speak God's truth and it will carry a force that nothing else can rival. "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces?"

It is an image of a powerful force, a force that will bring about change, but not by destroying completely. What would that accomplish? God's desire is to bring people home to God's love. The way God does that is by separating out the impurities, like a refiner's fire.

But how does this story speak to us today? Are we pleasing God with our national life or are we causing great offense to the Divine sense of justice and righteousness? That depends upon which would-be prophetic voice we listen to; and so, at some point, we have to wonder how we can tell the difference between the true prophets and the false.

It is a frequently named issue in scripture and a constant challenge in human experience. History sorts things out. After the fact, it became clear that Jeremiah was right, he was the true prophet, the nation fell. But how could people have known at the time? How can we know?

Well, prophets of God don't show up to say everything is fine, especially when it isn't. Prophets of God don't provide cover for the misdeeds of people and their leaders, especially obvious misdeeds. There are always people who claim to be God's messengers who do, but they are not speaking for God. God's character is righteous and just, God's word is like a refiner's fire achieving its purpose. The true prophet speaks the difficult word that needs to be heard, the call to change, and it comes with force, but the end result is something needed, desperately needed, a more just way of living.

In the reading from Luke it is equally clear that the people still need refining, individual people like us. And so, Jesus says that he comes to bring fire to the earth. This is the same Jesus who says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28)." We like this side of Jesus better. This is the Jesus we picture on our stained-glass window, the gentle shepherd, not the fire-breathing dragon! How can this be the same person? Well, again, we need to understand about what kind of fire Jesus is talking.

Jesus says that he comes to bring fire and he wishes that it were already kindled, but then he says that he has a baptism with which to be baptized, and he is under great stress until it is completed. He is not talking about immersion in water, as two of our young people have experienced today, though that baptism is linked to this one. He is talking about his suffering and death which are necessary for salvation. He is talking about the cross through which he will transform the world.

So, he is linking fire with baptism, something John the Baptizer does as well when he says the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). He is saying that his suffering and death are a kind of fiery baptism through which God achieves the goal of salvation. He is saying that God's love set loose in the world is a passionate force which will do whatever it takes to redeem us.

Jesus' intent is always to care for the deepest needs of people. When people are weary and carrying heavy burdens, they need rest and someone to share those burdens. So, these are the things Jesus provides. When people need something more, a way to address their deepest flaws, he provides for that need too, but the nature of the need requires a different kind of help, one that has a cost, one that requires sacrifice and suffering, and not only for Jesus - for salvation involves not only Jesus' suffering on a cross but our willingness to embrace the gift God offers through that suffering; our willingness to change, practice repentance and, in the process, open our lives to the refiner's fire.

In his book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. describes a scene in which a Ghost longs to make the journey to the mountains of heaven but one thing prevents him - a little red lizard on his shoulder. He has grown accustomed to the lizard and cannot imagine life without him. Furthermore, there will be some discomfort in the process of change. An Angel offers to remove the lizard, he can do it in an instant, he says, but it will burn for a moment. So, the Ghost resists. "Isn't there another way?" he asks. No, there is not. Finally, after much debate, the Ghost says "O.K." and the Angel flicks the lizard to the ground whereupon it is transformed into a great stallion which the Ghost rides into the mountains of heaven.

It is a metaphor for the way God works in our lives, a metaphor for salvation. There are things that hold us back – other loyalties, bad habits and addictions, fear and anger, our unwillingness to love and forgive. But whatever gets in the way of healing and wholeness, whatever gets in the way of abundant life, God offers to remove, to burn away with Divine love. That's the kind of fire we need.

It was said of a woman in another setting where I served that she had a lot of fire but not much warmth. We don't need that kind of fire. We don't need anger and judgment, hatred and revenge. We do need the light of God's truth to separate out the good from the evil in our lives, the just from the unjust in the world, and to set our hearts aflame with love. May we be willing to make room for this kind of fire, the kind of fire that warms without burning, the kind of fire God in Christ brings.