

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
August 14, 2022 – 10 Pentecost  
Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 12:2; Luke 12:49-56  
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First, just a brief word about our first two lessons. The prophet Jeremiah warns his hearers against a gullible acceptance of prophets who offer comfort – “the deceit of their own heart” – and a warning as well to any who think that they can hide from God. He says that dreams – which people at the time accepted as messages from God – can also be lies, “straw,” instead of truth, “seed” that leads to growth and nourishment.

The Letter to the Hebrews evokes biblical stories of people who accomplished great things, or withstood great evil, through trust in God. With these examples before us – “so great a cloud of witnesses” – we can be encouraged to follow Jesus even to the cross in order to join God's heavenly kingdom.

In Year C – the year our Gospel readings are from Luke – at the beginning of the summer there ought to be this notice – “Warning: Church goer discretion is advised. Some listeners may find the words of Jesus disturbing.” Week after week our readings are anything but comfortable or comforting.

As I have said before, we need to remember that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross, so there is urgency and strong determination behind his words to his disciples. He declares, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” This fire is not a literal fire, but rather a symbol for judgment. Jesus has been assiduously teaching his disciples and crowds of listeners about the kingdom of God. He has contrasted, in no uncertain terms, God's ways of love and God's judgment of human behavior with the ways of the world – selfishness, greed, and exploitation of others. We may wonder how many people who heard Jesus' teaching took it to heart and led new lives. Perhaps we are hearing some very human frustration here, in Jesus' desire that the fire of judgment begin without further delay.

Then he says, “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” This baptism is his death. Jesus knows where he is going. He understands this journey to be God's will, and he goes on without turning back. But he confides in the people closest to him, “what stress I am under until it is completed!” Jesus has made his choice to go to the cross. He is fully human. The choice is terribly stressful.

Jesus goes on to say, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” At this crucial time, as he gets closer to the events that will take place in and near Jerusalem in Holy Week, people will either stand with him or against him, and in that sense, he will cause division, not peace. At another time Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40). But at this time Jesus needs the full allegiance of his followers. Luke records Jesus' words (11:23): “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” Jesus has made his choice, and others will choose to support him or reject him. This is a moment of judgment.

If you have been a church goer for a long time, you may know the hymn “Once to every man and nation.” The words were written in 1845 by the American poet James Russell Lowell as a protest against America's war with Mexico. Some of the words reflect, I think, this call of Jesus to stand with him in a crucial moment. “Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side. ... Though the

cause of evil prosper, yet 'tis truth alone is strong; though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong, yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadow keeping watch above his own."

This hymn was in the 1940 Episcopal hymnal, but it was not included in the 1982 hymnal. There was a good theological reason for this: we do not believe that each person is given only one chance to choose what is right and truthful and we do believe that God will forgive a person who has made a wrong choice and repents. With God there is both judgment and mercy. Nevertheless, as Jesus did with his disciples, the hymn reminds us to consider how important our choices are.

Jesus says that he has come to bring division in families, between people with the closest human ties. You may have experienced this or known someone who has. People in families or other close relationships can be so divided in their ways of life, so at odds in their choices for good or evil, truth or lies, that division must occur. The pain of breaking away, of division, can be intense. As Jesus said, "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell" (Mark 9:43). Cut off your hand! Jesus knows by experience that a decision for God's way can be that painful.

Now Jesus turns to the crowds. How will they "interpret the present time?" In other words, who will choose Jesus' way – God's way – and who will not? They have heard his teaching. They have witnessed God working through Jesus as he has fed the multitudes, healed the sick, and cast out demons. In Jesus the kingdom of heaven has come near in signs that can be read as clearly as the weather: a cloud means rain and a south wind means heat. So why do people go on living as though nothing is happening, as if the future did not belong to the reign of God?

One of the more challenging aspects of living as a follower of Jesus is to apply the lessons we encounter in scripture to ourselves and our own ways of living. Jesus questions us as he questioned the crowds in today's lesson from Luke. In our daily lives do we ignore the ways of God and the signs of God's glorious work in the world? Do we live like people who haven't been touched by Christ? Do we forget that we are going to God? Do we trust that the future does belong to the reign of God? Do we take seriously the importance of our choices in life, for good or evil?

The author of The Letter to the Hebrews writes that "for the sake of the joy that was set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." Through all his times of suffering, through the years of his ministry, that was where Jesus was headed. We don't know how much of this Jesus understood before his death and resurrection. But we do know that he was deeply connected to God, that he knew that he had come from God and was going to God. We can only imagine how that gave him the strength and courage to do God's will.

We are fully human and not divine. We will not be seated at the right hand of the throne of God. But God has given us life, and our lives are bound to God. Like Jesus, we have come from God and are going to God. We are meant to run "the race that is set before us" with faith, inspired by the "great cloud of witnesses" – the faithful people who have gone before us – and led especially by the example of Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." May God give us grace and strength and courage to remember this and to walk in God's way of love all the days of our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.