

Sermon for Proper 15, Year C
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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The northern kingdom of Israel was wiped out by the Assyrians over a century ago. The southern kingdom of Judah miraculously survived the Assyrian attack, and there was a brief religious revival under King Josiah about 80 years later. But Josiah was killed in battle, and his successors are wicked. Canaanite gods are worshipped in the temple. Public immorality and idolatry is rampant. God is bringing the new empire of Babylon down upon the nation of Judah, to take the leaders into captivity, and to completely subjugate it. But there are many priests of the temple and false prophets proclaiming that God loves the people of Judah and that he will save them from the Babylonian assault. Regardless of what some of those negative prophets may have said, all of our behavior is hunky dory, and we have nothing to fear from Babylon.

It is in this context that Jeremiah is called to be a true prophet. He is called to proclaim the truth that the Lord reveals to him. But that truth runs directly counter to the prevailing winds in politics, religion, and foreign policy. Jeremiah keeps speaking up for God, anyway. And the Lord has some choice words for the false prophets.

“Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? ... Do I not fill heaven and earth?” Newsflash: Don’t try to outsmart God. He knows everything. Don’t try to play at serving him. He knows what you’re doing. Even if the people around you haven’t called you on it, he’s got you pegged.

You see, these false prophets have violated the third commandment. They have taken God’s name in vain. They have pretended to speak for God when they were really just using his authority to promote their own opinions and pet immoralities. They have blasphemed. They may have had a dream, but it wasn’t from God. And they will not be allowed to continue on this path forever.

There is a difference between God’s truth and human speculation which is more than just words. One reflects reality; the other is empty and worthless. One gives life; the other gives death. Through Jeremiah, God says, “Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat?” The answer is simple: nothing, at least when it comes to the effect on the eater. Straw has no nutritional value. That’s why it’s used as bedding to capture the excrement of an animal. Wheat is food. It gives life. The straw is like the dream of the blaspheming prophet. The wheat is the life-giving word of the Lord.

But the life that is found in God's word is a life which will not abide in the presence of death. It is strong food and drink. It is "like fire ... and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces". And it will destroy that which is worthless and empty and false, all that is opposed to life.

And here we bark our shins on this startling statement of Jesus in St. Luke's Gospel: "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!" This is not Charles Wesley's "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" who so inspired insipid Victorian artists. This is the Jesus of the three cords, driving the moneychangers out of the temple. We can usually overlook his ferocity in that instance, because he was attacking those evil Capitalist rich people. But here is the stark reality that Jesus actually came to destroy things, things that we (if we're honest) hold dear.

He did not come to bring peace on earth, he says, but division. And if you think about it for a moment, you will see that it must be so. The earth is the realm of all that is fallen and broken. It is the anti-heaven. Jesus came to burn up everything earthly, everything that is not according to God's purpose. He didn't come to help us feel better about our sinful selves. He came to destroy sin, and everything that has resulted from it.

When the Word of God, the eternal second person of the Holy Trinity, comes to earth, there must be a conflict between the principles of heaven and earth, the principles of life and death, truth and falsehood, righteousness and emptiness. Simply by being God incarnate, Jesus instigates a war centering on himself. And it is a war in which none of us can remain neutral. Either we eat the wheat, or we try to eat the straw. There are no other choices. And others will choose differently. Even those of our own families, sometimes. Just like Jeremiah, we will find ourselves in conflict with everything we know on the earth.

The truth that we live in the Holy Spirit will run counter to the prevailing winds in politics, religion, foreign policy, morality, and social issues. We will be out of step. We will be eating the wheat, while many others are trying to eat straw and insisting that straw is the only nutritious meal. We will be listening to God and obeying God rather than men.

And in the meantime, God himself will be waging war inside us on the parts of us that are not of him. Because he loves us, he will discipline us. And although we will be beset with conflict both externally and internally, this will paradoxically produce in us the peace that we are looking for. "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

And so the writer of Hebrews encourages us to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us". We are to "strive for peace with all men". Not the cheap peace that is simply the absence of open conflict, but the peace that stems

from righteousness. We are to strive “for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” But the Lord himself has already set in motion the process by which we will be purified. He “came to cast fire upon the earth,” and his fire will not fail to consume all that is earthly in us.