

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 18, 2013
Pentecost 13
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 23:23-29
Psalm 82
Hebrews 12:1-14
Luke 12:49-56

This week was one of those weeks where, after reading the Gospel lesson, I immediately said to myself: “what are the other lessons, and which one can I preach?”

The epistle lesson from Hebrews looked attractive, and so I turned in that direction. But it wasn't long before I discovered that I had preached the Hebrews text the last three times these lessons cycled through the lectionary, forcing me to admit that something about the Gospel lesson makes me uncomfortable, so uncomfortable that I have avoided preaching it for several years.

Perhaps it's the way Jesus begins the passage that gives me pause. In blunt, matter-of-fact terms, Jesus says: “I have come to bring *fire* to the earth. I have come not to bring peace, but strife and division! I have come to split families apart!” (49-53)

Do you understand now why I have fled to the book of Hebrews the last several years when these texts surface for this Sunday?

These words of Jesus don't square with other images I have of Jesus that have become dear to me. Images of Old Testament prophets claiming that Jesus

would bring in the promised reign of God's peace, that he would be the rising sun from heaven that would "guide our footsteps into the way of peace."

I have images in my mind of the "meek and mild" Jesus, the Jesus who is the "little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay, the cattle are lowing but no crying he makes" Jesus.

I have images of Jesus who says, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for I have been anointed to bring good news to the captives, to set free those who are in prison, to announce the year of the Lord's favor."

I have echoes of John's words in my mind, when he says: "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world."

I have echoes of the words of Jesus himself, who says: "Peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you..."

So it is a bit of a shock to my system to hear these words of Jesus from our Gospel lesson this morning. They upset my equilibrium. They take my breath away for a moment.

What on earth does Jesus mean by these words, and the rather blunt way he says them?

Let me ask you a question this morning: Have you ever faced a time in your life when you were under immense stress? The kind of stress and pressure that took you to the breaking point? The kind of stress that kept you up nights, that

churned out so much acid in your stomach that it would burn a hole in a ship's hull?

Three chapters prior to these words, Luke tells us that Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem.” And from that time, conflicts with the religious authorities and political powers have intensified to near the breaking point.

As we arrive here in chapter 12, Jesus is fully aware that he is not far from Jerusalem, where these conflicts will boil over into a plot that will take his life. He knows full well that he is about to be baptized not by water, but by the fire kindled by nails and wood. And the reality of all of this is “pressing in” on him.

When I say “pressing in” on him, that’s Luke’s term, not mine. In fact, the term Luke uses here to describe what is happening to Jesus may be very interesting to you. The Greek term means “holding together,” “holding tightly,” or “squeezing.” The best English word we have to translate this is (are you ready?): *stress*.

The translators of the New Revised Standard Version have done a great job translating Jesus’ words here from verse 50: “There is a terrible burden ahead of me, and *what stress I am under until it is accomplished.*”

Jesus is soon to arrive in Jerusalem. And the weight of the world is literally “pressing in” upon him. He is under stress, to the point of being “distressed.” And this stress has brought some harsh truth into the bright light of day.

Jesus says, “from now on, families will be split apart. There will be division between father and son, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.”

What Jesus is saying and doing here reminds me of a gable on a house. Two drops of rain water could fall directly on that gable and wind up in two vastly different places.

And as Jesus is approaching Jerusalem, I believe he is creating a “crisis” in the world. A crisis not in the sense of an “emergency,” but in the sense of the *moment of truth and decision* in life. Jesus is literally becoming a “human fulcrum.” People’s lives, people’s destinies, are about to turn on what will happen in Jerusalem. Every notion of peace, in terms of the *status quo*, is now overturned – *even among families*. **People are about to be placed in a position of decision, and to be placed in a position of decision is critical, for to turn toward one person or goal is to turn away from another.**

The problem is that often, we can be thrust into a moment of decision in our lives and not even recognize it. We can be on the fulcrum, with life-changing circumstances confronting us, and not know it.

Jesus says as much: “you hypocrites – you know how to forecast the weather and can see the signs of earth and sky, yet you don’t understand these present times.” Folks could see clouds forming and conclude that a storm was

near, but they were blind to God's greater sign in their midst, i.e., the ministry and work of Jesus.

But that was then. And we are here now, today, in this setting. What is the upshot of Jesus' words for us today? Permit me a couple observations:

First, in a day and age where "stress" is one of our watchwords, many of us feel pulled at times beyond what we can endure. We are not facing crucifixion, but we know what it's like to face the loss of a job, a terminal illness, or a hundred other crises. It seems fair to say that we are always in one of three places in life: we are either entering into crisis, in a crisis, or emerging from a crisis.

In the midst of that reality, hear this good news: Jesus has been where you are. Jesus came to save and redeem your stressful condition.

Second, Luke wrote these words about forty years after Jesus made that fateful trip into Jerusalem. Because Luke writes the way he does, we can guess with some confidence that forty years after the fact, the division Jesus speaks about is playing out in many communities and locations. And we would do well to remember, and pray for, Christians in other parts of the world for whom their confession of Jesus has brought strife, division, danger, and even death.

Finally, I would say to you, that if you have not already considered the claim of Jesus on your life, the time to do so is NOW. Now, more than ever before, is the time of decision. Now is the time to give your heart's attention to God. Every

person within the sound of my voice this morning should hear the urgency in my voice when I say: Do not toy with your relationship with God. Do not assume you will always have tomorrow to put things right with God and with others. Do not underestimate or take lightly His offer of grace and forgiveness to you *today*.

As we come to the table this morning, the One who carried the stress of the world on his shoulders waits to meet us here in the power of the Holy Spirit. The bread and wine this morning are channels of grace to you. Open your hearts and receive them by faith. And go forth in the peace He offers you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.