

THE HAMMER AND THE FIRE

A sermon preached by Verna J. Dozier at St. Mark's, Capitol Hill
Washington, DC August 17, 1986

Scripture for the Day: Jeremiah 23:23-29; Psalm 82;
Luke 12:49-56; Hebrews 12:1-7 (8-10) 11-14.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be right and acceptable, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Our liturgy today, you might say, hands us a mixed message. In the collect we prayed, "Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life." and we are all prepared to settle comfortably into pious discipleship - sweet and gentle and predictable - when the Scriptures hit us with the fury of the refiner's fire:

Jeremiah likening the action of God to hammer and fire;

the psalm with its image of judgment;

Jesus in the Gospel crying out that he has come to set fire upon the earth and he is straining to get started;

the Epistle to the Hebrews warning of trouble ahead - get your act together - "lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees" is how the author put it.

Heavy fare for a hot August Sunday.

What do you do when you encounter a powerful reality that can change your life, an understanding that calls all your understandings into question? Accept it uncritically? Reject it uncritically? Change it to make it acceptable? Live with it to search out its possibilities of cost and promise for you? These represent four responses we make to the Bible. You recognize them.

The uncritical acceptance: It means what it says. "I believe it literally." You have seen, perhaps, the bumper sticker: "God said it. The Bible records it. And I believe it."

The uncritical rejection: "Nothing to it. Primitive superstition. I've outgrown the need for that."

Change it: "What it really means is this." Or you pick and choose what parts you will accept and what parts you will ignore - generally chosen in terms of what supports your comfort level.

Live with it.

The Bible has much to say to us, but its message is about God, and the first message it gives is God's ways are not our ways, and the second message is no simple understanding of God is an understanding of God.

Week by week the Propers try to introduce us to that God. We have chosen discipleship as our theme for this summer series. It is a good theme for this season of Pentecost because in a way Pentecost is the "so what?" of the Christian year. So God has come to God's own people and been rejected by them and has proved greater than any rejection - so what? So what are we about now?

During Pentecost we hold up the mirror of our faith to look at what it means to live as the people of God. And that is not an easy thing to do because although God is a God who wills to be known - remember Jeremiah's understanding - "Am I a God at hand and not a God far off?" - God also is a God who takes risks. God will not blast humankind with an irrefutable disclosure of the Godhead. God drops hints and leaves it to us to make up our minds. The story of God's working with the people of Israel is one such hint, and it is against that hint that Jeremiah accuses the false prophets in our Old Testament lesson.

People today get very nervous when you talk about false prophets. "How do you know?" they quiver. Jeremiah had no such problem. He held them up against the understanding of God derived from his people's ancient understanding:

They are the prophets of the deceit of their own heart,
which cause my people to forget my name by their dreams
which they tell every man to his neighbor, as their
fathers have forgotten my name for Baal.

Idolatry is no new thing. We are always looking for easy gods, gods that shape the world as we want it to be, gods that affirm us, gods that shut out all that troubles, that disturbs, that says "No" as well as "Yes." Dreams, Jeremiah calls them. Fantasies.

The word of God is like a hammer and a fire. Searing, destructive. We have to wrestle with that image of God, too, or our God is too small, too cozy.

Psalm 82 has an echo of Jeremiah, envisioning God calling those false gods to judgment - the criterion for their falseness being they had no concern for the poor and the afflicted. An ancient understanding of the Israelites.

For Christians the most significant hint God gives of God is in Jesus of Nazareth, and we look to the Gospels for some understanding of that impelling figure. In the Gospel appointed for today we find him agonizing over his task:

"I came to cast fire upon the earth . . ."

Again that destructive image.

Something is wrong in the world. It is not as God would have it. Creation is fallen. The risk that God took was that those free human beings would use their freedom to carry out God's vision of a friendly world of friendly folk beneath a friendly sky. Instead we have everyone's hand against every other - race against race, clan against clan, nation against nation - and God against us all who has to be appeased with cultic rites or outwitted by other gods.

Jesus came with a possibility for changing all that, but it was not going to be easy. There are always enough people who profit by what is to resist what might be. "I am not come to bring peace," cried Jesus, not ease, not status quo, not business-as-usual, not the way we have always understood it, but division. Some will follow; some won't. And the division will rend every human arrangement, even the most honored.

The prayer of the Collect, "to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life," begins to take on darker dimensions. The little community of Jewish Christians to whom the Letter to the Hebrews is written certainly found out about the darker dimensions. They are reminded to look to Jesus as the example and, in the same breath almost, reminded that they have not resisted to the shedding of blood. They are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. In those days "to witness" meant to stand up for another way of life than that of the prevailing power. Small wonder they are told to lift the drooping hands and strengthen the weak knees.

We are called to serious business. To follow Jesus calls us further than most of us, including me, dare to go; but, Pentecost is a good time to think on discipleship and search out the possibilities of cost and promise for us.

I think the Christian life moves in ever widening - and sometimes for some people - overlapping-circles, like swimming in deep waters. The first circle is "know yourself." Know your weaknesses, your painful history, your conceits and deceits, your fears and your lies. Know it all, or know you can't know it all.

The second circle is "accept yourself." You are forgiven. You are fully known and fully accepted. At every eucharist, that is the message. The God who created you loves you and calls you into the kingdom of new possibilities. You can't believe it? No matter. It's true. You don't deserve to be accepted? Acceptance is not about deserving. It's about unconditional love. You don't have much respect for a God who would accept you? No matter. God can get along without your respect. You are fully known and fully accepted and have the beginning, I believe, of the possibilities of discipleship.

The third circle is "forget yourself." And now changing the metaphor to the one of Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin, which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Companion, Amen.