

Jeremiah speaks of God's word being "like fire," "like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces. Hebrews talks of prophets tortured, flogged, put in chains, stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword—destitute, persecuted, tormented.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells us he's come not to bring peace, but to bring fire to the earth and division—father turning against son and son against father, mother and daughter divided— scorching heat, and yet still more fire.

After reading today's scripture, I'm convinced that when Manny put together the preaching schedule last spring, he took one look at these lessons and said, "No thank you. I'm going to assign this to my deacon."

I don't know about you, but I find this morning's readings dark, gritty, *hard*. Particularly Luke's emphasis on division, for I can read my news feed to get my dose of that. Today's Gospel is a far cry from last week's when Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock. For it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." This week, in terms of the Good News, Jesus really isn't selling it.

If I were a person newly exploring Christianity, someone who'd never been to church before and wandered in this morning and heard these readings, I might walk out that door after the dismissal and never return.

This is a hard Jesus to take. We like our Jesus to uplift us, encourage us, heal us. To turn our blindness to sight, to save us from violent storms, to drive out our demons, to turn water into wine, to dine with us, to coo at us from a manger. Jesus, our great Prince of Peace.

We are less comfortable with the Jesus we meet this morning, who, judging from the many exclamation points in Luke's account, seems frustrated, possibly exasperated. He's gone from patiently trying to teach the disciples, to what reads like a good old-fashioned fire-and-brimstone sermon.

In looking at the tone of this passage, though, Jesus's words carry the kind of urgency and exhortation normally born out of concern and care—out of love. Like a parent trying to get through to a wayward child, Jesus seems to be giving his disciples a serious reality check.

Free-range parenting aside, what parents among us haven't had to give our children a reality check now and then? Even as we tend to their needs and comfort and guide, who among us hasn't had to sit our children down at one point or another and say, "Listen, I'm going to tell you how it really is..."? Who among us hasn't had to do this with a family member or close friend?

If we can accept today's Gospel as a reality check of sorts—one born of love and concern—then perhaps we can set aside our discomfort with this Jesus and take some time to discern what he wants us to take away, both for our personal faith lives and as a church community.

To do that, I think it's helpful to consider Jesus's words as *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. Is Jesus really saying he intends to divide families? We've heard him speak so many times of peace, surely that cannot be true. Think of the post-resurrection Jesus greeting his disciples with, "Peace be with you," or John 14's "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." And I could go on: close to a hundred references to peace in the New Testament—dozens of those in the Gospels.

It just doesn't jive for me that Jesus means to prescribe division for the world. Rather, it makes more sense that he's describing the reality of how the world will be as God's kingdom is ushered in.

Let's unpack that a little. The fire Jesus speaks of that we may be tempted to see as hurtful, is likely a fire meant more to refine, to purify, than to burn. Indeed, Jesus talks of baptism in the same breath. In the original Greek, the words "fire" and "baptism" begin their respective sentences, for added emphasis. The language of these verses is reminiscent of John the Baptist's promise that Jesus will baptize in the Holy Spirit and fire. This leaves us to consider the likelihood that the fire he speaks to is metaphorical. In this context of purification, we can see God's plan for burning away what is impure: for dismantling the status quo, for flipping the current world order upside down.

For besides being the Prince of Peace, Jesus is a radical agent for transformation. Jesus desires healing for all creation. That means greed, idolatry, exploitation, oppression, dehumanization, they all have to go. The refining and purifying elements of "fire" will mean an end to unjust systems and perverse powers—a prospect that will not sit well with those who have been served well by those systems.

And so, division and discord are inevitable. Indeed, as we look around our world today, we see those divisions at play. Cracks in the established order are forging instability in our foundation. We are standing on shaky ground. This is as much a reality check for us today as it was for the early disciples.

The question for us as Christians and for Christ Church at large is: Where do we need a reality check?

Where have we become complacent, unwilling to evolve or to explore new approaches, because it seems too difficult? Are we open to where God is trying to take us, even when it may be messy?

Last week Amanda Talbot of St. Luke's Youth Center was our guest preacher. She struck a chord for me as she spoke of how she'd grown up privileged, got her master's degree, and spent 12 comfortable years teaching, but still her faith was missing something. It was missing something, until she opened herself to God's call and allowed herself to become vulnerable. And in a new endeavor teaching children in West Baltimore, among people who had little in terms of material wealth but were rich in faith, she learned much about herself and God's plan for her life.

I was similarly struck by a conversation I had with Pat Delorenzo, one of our Refugee Ministry leaders. Pat recalled how when we first began this ministry, she'd planned to work behind the scenes—thinking she'd probably not interact much with the family at all. And now, six months later, she's so close to the family they call her Memaw, "Grandmother."

I also recall a conversation a few weeks ago among a small group of us exploring the possibility of prison ministry, and what that might look like at Christ Church. Beyond things like sending educational supplies to prisoners, surely we could look at some kind of relational ministry, and perhaps advocate for change to help those imprisoned—maybe even to change the systems that so disproportionately affect people of the margins. The unspoken question in our discussion was, would the congregation be willing to engage in such a journey?

I often hear that Christ Church does so much. We have our hands full with various ministries; new ones should be carefully considered. Indeed, if you look at

our website, particularly the Outreach page, you'll see a host of vibrant ministries, from our work with the local Grassroots shelter, to international efforts like *Somos Amigos*.

A year ago, when we were discerning the possibility of beginning a refugee ministry, I heard several people say our plates were too full. We were already doing enough and giving enough. Now, we would ask the congregation to give more. Of course, we did stand up the refugee ministry—now an ecumenical effort comprising some 50 people across four congregations, with more than \$30,000 raised to date to help support this family. A family we've formed strong bonds with, as they transition to life here and work toward self-sufficiency.

The question for us personally and as a faith community is not whether we can or should take on new ministry. It's where are we being called, and do we have faith that God will give us what we need if we follow?

Ministry can be messy—the disciple's journey can be dirty. We will at times be disorganized, seem incompetent, experience failure. There will be disagreements. We will get offended. We will offend others. If we come to church just to feel good, we are missing the point.

Don't get me wrong: the Type A personality in me completely understands the desire for organization and order. But when does our need for tidy and clean come at the cost of growth? When does our fear of offending people come at the cost of speaking truth?

Jesus didn't call for us to keep the peace. He called for us to *usher in* peace—to *strive* for peace and justice among all people, and respect the dignity of every

human being. For that to happen, there will most certainly be uncomfortable moments of change and transformation.

Each week, new people tune in online or walk in our doors, hungry to make a difference in this hurting world. Of course, we want to show them we work well together, we share fellowship and enjoy each other's company. But I think we also want to show them that *we are fired up*. That we are as fired up as Jesus calls us to be, willing to step out into the dirty and messy places we're sometimes called. That we are willing, as Hebrews says, to run the race with perseverance, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Where do we need a reality check? Where is Jesus inviting us to get fired up?

For those of us who are unhappy with the status quo, who recognize the brokenness of this world, the Good News is that Jesus *will* usher in God's kingdom. God's authority will prevail. In God's unconditional love for the world—for all his beloved children, he will make this right. Systems will be turned upside down, corruption and violence will end, justice will be served.

In the ongoing battle for the soul of humanity, evil will not go quietly into the night. And for a time, peace will not be the priority. Houses will end up divided. Bonds will be broken. Fire will burn away what needs to be made new. And in that battle, it's the Jesus we encounter this morning in—speaking the gritty and hard truth—this is the Jesus I want to follow into the fray—follow knowing that in God's promise of salvation and reconciliation, evil and death do not have the final word. Surely that's something to get fired up about.