

August 14, 2022

Jeremiah 23:16-29, Hebrews 11:16-12:1-3, St. Luke 12:49-53:

“He Came to Cast Fire on the Earth”

- I. The Fire of the Word.
- II. The Cloud of Witnesses.
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Dear Friends in Christ,

The May/June edition of Touchstone publication featured a paper written by Rod Dreher entitled, "Babylon's Furnace." He wrote, "I'm 54 years old. For all my life, talk of anti-Christian persecution in America has been reserved primarily for speculative fiction of the "Left Behind" variety. Those days are over. Christians today have to prepare themselves to face real persecution."(p.23) Dreher refers to the present age as the "new totalitarianism". The warning from Scripture is clear . . .

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power....(2 Timothy 3:1-5).

The last days. We're in them, well into them. Many church people have spent a long time feeding the "snake oil" preachers; buying their assortment of lies and deception. This morning we're confronted with the magnifying glass that clarifies the course of the church in this world. This morning . . .

HE CAME TO CAST FIRE ON THE EARTH

I. The Fire of the Word.

Here are verses sixteen and seventeen from our Old Testament text, Jeremiah 23:

"Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you;' and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'" (vv.16-17)

Many of you remember Robert H. Schuller of Glass Cathedral fame. In his book, "Self Esteem, The New Reformation" published in 1983 he wrote, "I don't think anything has been done in of name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality and hence counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise than the often crude, uncouth, unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition." Let's see, what was it Jesus said? Oh yes, "I came not to call the righteous (that is, self-righteous) but sinners." (Mk. 2:17b) And what was it that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, said about John? "...you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins." (Lk. 1:76,77) Do we really want to discuss where glorifying self-esteem has brought this country, this world? Would we ignore the words of Jesus to His church: "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it, that its works are evil." (Jn. 7:7)

The false prophets of the past and the present are brothers in arms. As God said through Jeremiah: "They speak visions of their own minds...they continually say to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'it shall be well with you...no disaster shall come upon you.'" And God's word says, "All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Rm. 3:12)

Verses 28 and 29 of Jeremiah 23 record this Word from God: "Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak it faithfully...Is not my word like a fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" The Word is like a fire. It burns away the dross and exposes the reality of sin and the need for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. It exposes this world's

hatred of the Christ, and yet the world's on-going pursuit of wars, injustices, and cruelties. If I asked a person, "What would you say to God if He asked you why He should let you into heaven?", in light of our daily thoughts, words and deeds toward others, do you think a person could say, "Well, I have great self esteem?"

II. The Cloud of Witnesses.

All this brings us to the Epistle lesson from Hebrews 12:1 & 2:

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 endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God.

As most of you know, the "cloud of witnesses" takes us back to the eleventh chapter of Hebrews and the great list of Old Testament saints who gave up everything to follow the Lord - gave up everything because they saw what this world is, a world that might have some great and mighty moments, but, beyond the facades we build in life, it's still a world of sin, trouble, dying and death.

Our Epistle lesson bids us to recall these words about Moses: "By faith Moses...refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward." (Heb. 11:12-26)

Can we say the same thing? Can we? What about these words from that eleventh chapter: "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword." (vv.35b-37) These, and many others of the past are the witnesses who surround us.

This text then admonishes us, "let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us..." (vv.1,2) Endure. The word points to something that will be stressful and requires determination. It's a race - not a walk, not a crawl, not lots of "times out".

Don't you find it interesting, sad and tragic that most of the church today focuses on the peace and contentment to be gained from getting in sync with this world's thinking? It's got to be straight with us because the race is getting tougher: "Do not love the world. If anyone loves the world (will do whatever it takes to have whatever one wants from this world) the love of the Father is not in him...the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever." (1 Jn. 1:15-17)

And what is the will of God? Jesus said. "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (Jn. 6:40) It's the will of God that we never allow this truth to fade: "while we were sinners Christ died for us." So what choice is there but to "run with endurance the race that is set before us"? Our sins are forgiven! We have eternal life and joy through faith in Christ!

We're in a fierce race, brothers and sisters. If heaven is your goal, it makes no difference how young and how excited you are about anything of this world. It makes no difference how old and worn you are and might feel. You are - we are - in a race - and it isn't easy. In fact . . .

III. The Fire.

Our Gospel lesson impresses upon us these words of Jesus: "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!" (Lk. 12:49) That's a reference to Judgment Day itself. It's moving swiftly toward this world. And then, please listen carefully, as Jesus said,

"Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." (vv.51-53)

The growing antagonism toward God's people in Christ is a powerful testimony of man's rejection of "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rm.3:23)." The flesh rules. But just for awhile longer.

Think of it, the multitudes trying to find something that will lighten the load of a burdened conscience; trying to find some way to get out of a sad and disappointing life. And it makes no difference how flippant or God rejecting a person might be, there's still that pile of dirt looming in the shadows. For those who reject Christ, if given a time of consciousness before the last breath, the question will be there in one form or another: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Mt. 16:26)

HE CAME TO CAST FIRE ON THE EARTH. His blood put it out, for those who believe. God enable us to endure!

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott