

Jeremiah 23:23-29 ~ Luke 12:49-56

What Does This Mean?

10th Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 14, 2022

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Introduction

Before you look at our Second Scripture Lesson, I want you to close your eyes for a few seconds. (Yes, the preacher is *inviting* you to close your eyes at the beginning of a sermon, now *that is risky*.) Close your eyes, and think about Jesus and his ministry on earth. Of all the things he said and did, what words or picture of Jesus comes into your mind right now? You can open your eyes now. What did you think of first? Maybe, you thought of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gently seeking all of his lost sheep; or Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, or Jesus blessing the children. If you really love Christmas, maybe you thought of baby Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem.

Whatever came to your mind, I'm quite sure that today's lesson was *not* it. Continuing our reading from last week, in Luke 12:49 at this point Jesus is really ramping it up. It sounds as though he was shouting, maybe even pointing his finger at them. Yes, we get a look today at our Lord and Savior, ranting and raving. If you didn't know it was Jesus, you might think it was cranky old Jeremiah. But no, this is prophet Jesus speaking, having set his face to go to Jerusalem all the way back in Luke 9:51. The shadow of the cross is looming on the horizon. His knows his time on earth is running out, and he is trying to get their attention. Trying to get them to see the big picture. Trying to get them to understand what he really means. Imploring them to open their eyes wider and see what was happening. No wonder Jesus was upset.

Right now, let us honor our Lord and Savior by sitting up straight and opening our eyes and hearts as wide as we can, giving God our full attention. His words may surprise or confuse you, even infuriate you. Trust that whatever their immediate impact, coming from Jesus the message really is ultimately good news.

Sermon

Did any of you see the Adam McKay satirical film, "Don't Look Up"? It stars Jennifer Lawrence and Leonardo DiCaprio as scientists (yes) trying to convince a distracted public that a comet is headed to destroy the planet. The solution on the part of those in power is to silence them and to counter their message with a campaign, summed up in its slogan (and the title of the film): "Don't Look Up." The majority of the population go along with this strategy and ignore the impending catastrophe. Apparently, it has become one of the most-watched films ever on Netflix.¹ Whatever you may have thought of the movie (I will say my heart was pounding throughout), it can be seen as a parable addressing our slow response to climate change. However, it can serve as a parable with a much broader scope.

I see this movie posing a larger question: When something seems wrong, but to address it would upset the status quo, what do we do? We could stay quiet to keep the peace. That might seem easier. Even the right path. Keeping people happy as they are may feel good. But, is

that really the peace that Jesus came to the earth to proclaim? I don't think so. The peace that Jesus came to give us would lead him to terrible suffering and to death on the cross, which he calls a *baptism* here in verse 50. One that he is under great stress until it is completed. The peace of Jesus is not an "easy peasy peace" by a long stretch. Maybe that's what he meant when he said: "My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." (John 14:27.)

So what does he mean in today's text when he asks: "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you! (v.51)? Truth is, I believe most of us think, "Well, yeah. Isn't that what we sing every Christmas: 'Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king: Peace on earth and mercy mild.' We kind of *did* think you came to bring peace. We call you the Prince of Peace, you know. So, what do you mean that you came to bring division, not peace. Help us understand what you are telling us here."

If only we could know exactly what Jesus meant. Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't really provide a method for interpreting itself. The truth is, we always have to interpret because no word (in any language) communicates just one idea or meaning in every context where's it's used. As theologian and author Walter Brueggemann has written, "Nobody's reading is final or inerrant. All biblical interpretation is inescapably provisional and inevitably disputatious."ⁱⁱ Which is a fancy way of saying any time we do our best to interpret what the Bible says, it is never final and can always be debated. We wish it were otherwise, but maybe this is because God wants us to keep learning, keep trying, keep talking about it. So here goes!

I think in so many words, Jesus is being provocative, even shocking in his language in order to get his audience to look up! He's telling them to open their eyes and see that the kingdom of God has been inaugurated in him, standing before them. It should be as obvious as predicting the weather. Maybe the reason people don't want to look up is because the kingdom that Jesus is calling for will upset the status quo. Existing lines of authority and duty will be dismantled. To be on the same page as Jesus, means to get off the page we are on. It means letting fire burn away what isn't of God. It means hammering and breaking down our stubborn resistance to loving those peculiar neighbors as ourselves. We are hard headed and don't really want to give an inch of the power, the prestige, the comfort that we were born into. This kind of change, or even the threat of it, will bring division and hardship. I think that's part of what Jesus is talking about here.

The familial relationships that Jesus mentions—such father and son, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, were all duty-based relationships in the ancient world. These relationships could involve affection, but they always involved duty and obligation. Perhaps Jesus is urging his listeners to move beyond the duty that is a focal point of these relationships. I think he is also calling forth the primacy of loyalty to God and the rule of love, over family ties and social obligation. Even if it disrupts the family system. Often when a person who has been abused by another family member reveals the abuse *they* are perceived as the problem, and shunned by their family. "Why didn't you just keep silent and leave things as they were." Or a family members finds the courage to reveal their true identity which is different than what their family expects, division and hardship also follow.

The same aversion to conflict holds true when it comes to every day kinds of conflicts. Most of us avoid them. I know I do. I like to please people, help them get along, keep the peace. I don't think I am alone, in that regard. I believe I am in good company here in Wisconsin and the greater Midwest. Conflict-avoidance is the Kool-Aid we drink, or in our case in Wisconsin, it's in the beer we love to drink. Regardless of our preferred beverage: the majority of us imbibe in the culture of "Mid-West Nice." "You're good, we're good, everything is AOK. Right? If not, let's act that way." Peace at any price is not the peace of Christ.

Church culture is no exception. Most churches are allergic to conflict, at least on the surface. We don't like conflict, besides, aren't we supposed to love one another? We prefer the "happy clappy" Jesus, but then we open our eyes and ears and hearts to hear what Jesus is saying and what he really meant. We consider where the path of love led Jesus and we learn: following Jesus is not a way out of conflict, but will lead into conflict. Unity for the sake of unity is not faithful. That is what Jesus is teaching us here in this text. As much as we resist it: conflict can be a blessing. Healthy relationships, healthy churches honor Christ when they do their best to address conflict head-on. Unhealthy churches avoid conflict in favor of being "nice."

Here's the takeaway: I hear Jesus saying: if you want to follow me expect conflict. There: have your "go bag" ready. You have probably heard of a "go bag." Pregnant moms when they near their due date pack a "go bag" with what they will need for the hospital. Folks who live in areas of our country prone to forest fires or hurricanes pack a "go bag" to prepare for an emergency evacuation. I'm suggesting, In the same way, as Christ followers, we need a spiritual "go bag" so we are prepared when conflicts erupt. Maybe a hammer, a lighter, water, bread, and wine? Loyalty to God's way of Divine Love can cause unexpected conflict. Therefore, we would be wise to prepare ourselves. What do you need to do spiritually, to get ready? Any fire needs tending to keep ablaze. Perhaps each of us needs something different to keep the Holy Spirit fire blazing within. Ready to deploy as needed. What is in your "go bag?"

Back in June of 1978, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Russian writer and activist, was invited to give the commencement address at Harvard University to a crowd of 20,000 who had gathered for this graduation event. He had been expelled from the Soviet Union four years earlier, after long imprisonment in its gulag labor camps followed by internal exile. He had always spoken vigorously against the injustices he experienced in the communist system. But that day in the USA, he was speaking to American college students, their parents and grandparents. In that speech he said, "If the world has not approached its end, it has reached a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will demand from us a spiritual blaze; we shall have to rise to a new height of vision... (so that) our spiritual being will not be trampled upon as in the Modern Era."ⁱⁱⁱ

I began by asking you to close your eyes and think of Jesus. Then I invited you to notice what picture of Jesus came to mind. For me, especially after the horrendous week of escalating violence we've just experienced across our great nation, what I see is Jesus, weeping over Jerusalem. Luke tells us in 20:41, "As he came near and saw the city, *he wept over it*, saying, "If

you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. The days will come when your enemies will surround and crush you because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God." I believe he is weeping over our nation. Jesus has shown us a better, still more excellent way.

"Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off?" (Jeremiah 23:23) Friends, here is the good news. Our God is near by, nearer than our next breath. Our Creator and Redeemer who weeps for us, who suffered and died for us, to show us the way of peace. To blaze a pathway for us. The way that opens our eyes to see that love and suffering are the universal paths to peace. Love and suffering bind us together by breaking down our usual ego defenses.^{iv}

If we open our eyes and do look up, we will see, we have work to do. We can be hard headed. Tough nuts to crack, so to speak. No wonder God talks of hammers and fire. The things that make for peace *are not* keeping our heads down and avoiding conflict. Peace is not the absence of conflict. God's peace hammers away and burns down the parts within us and around us that resist God's dream.

We are here today, I believe, because we believe that God's dream will come true. The dream of God's true prophets. The dream that those with all the political power tried to destroy. But this was also the dream of Jesus; whom God raised from the dead, breaking through our worst, to give us the best. I will leave us with this vision of God's dream from Revelation 21-22, as told by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his Storybook Bible:

When the disciple John was very old God sent him dreams and visions. He saw that there would be wars and famines and floods and terrible disasters. But God told John, "Soon I will make a new heaven and a new earth. Then every tear will be wiped away. I will be with my people, and they will be with me. Everyone will live in peace and joy. God showed John a vision of this holy place... "From this place, God said, "will flow the river of life and from it I will give the water of life to everyone who is thirsty. On either side of the river will be the tree of life, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. You are my children. You are all siblings together, my family. Come and drink, my beloved children, from the water that gives you life, love, and joy!"

Let us pray,

Dear God, help us to make your dream of a new earth come true. Amen.

ⁱ Chris Dela Cruz, "American Christianity's Aggressive Individualism," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 14, 2022, p.32.

ⁱⁱ Peter W. Marty, "Foundational Texts," From the editor/publisher, *Christian Century*, August 10, 2022, p.3.

ⁱⁱⁱ As quoted by Mark Ramsey, "Igniting a Spiritual Blaze for All our Generations," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2022, pp.9, 14.

^{iv} From Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, (Crossroad Publishing: New York, NY, 2009), pp 122-123, 127.