

Sunday, August 15th, 2010

All Consuming Fire

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2; Luke 12:49-56

How many churches have a picture on their walls of Jesus bringing down fire to the earth? Not any that I know of – at least not in a Lutheran church. The text is a bit shocking. Who is this Jesus? Is this the same Jesus of love and forgiveness? I'm not sure how many people like the picture of this Jesus who says that he comes not to bring peace, but division. But then again, Jesus did not come in order to make life easy and comfortable for us. He is not the Jesus of happy feelings where we are all holding hands and skipping together. Jesus did not come to bring our definition of peace. It has been asked in wonderment why "with all of the different peace groups around the world, why the world hasn't become more peaceful" and the answer is that each group wants its own kind of peace, on its own terms, and in its own way.

So, obviously Jesus did not read the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Otherwise, he would not have spoken about the bringing of fire and division and not peace. And yet, as it always is with our radical God, Jesus' fire is one that must consume all of us to redefine peace.

One of the basic skills that is needed when you go camping is the art of campfire building. Now, you would think this is not a very controversial subject, but if you talk to outdoor enthusiasts, they all seem to have the best way in which to build it. I, myself, like to form a small triangle/teepee structure out of kindling or scraps of wood and let that get going before larger pieces of wood are added to the structure. Only after the kindling is burning does a campfire builder begin to add those larger pieces and only when the fire is a sure thing can the largest log be placed. A fire must begin with kindling. Jesus is the kindling for an intense, all consuming fire that burns away our preconceived notions of peace.

In sticking with the campfire image, we are more apt to look at peace as the marshmallow being roasted over the fire than the fire itself – something that's soft, fluffy and sweet. But as quickly as that marshmallow can turn into a blackened piece of flaming charcoal, so does our sickly sweet image of peace burn up quickly. "Peace becomes a shallow calm of suppressed fears and conflicts" and once the marshmallow fluff is burned away, the conflicts emerge once again. I don't believe this is the peace that Jesus is talking about – it is the definition of peace that will be consumed by the fire of the Holy Spirit and the presence of the Christ.

There is a lot of study and interest in what "fire" and "baptism" mean in this passage, but whatever they mean, in these verses, the result of it is division. In the first century, this

literally meant division in families when it came to their beliefs and becoming a follower of Christ. It can happen today as well – what one believes brings division within a family.

At a recent Global Missions meeting, a man from Cameroon traveled to the United States to bring a message to South Dakota, his companion synod, as well as to the national church's global mission department. There had been division and rumors of division amongst the Lutheran Church in Cameroon, supposedly dividing the church along tribal lines. This man was from the tribal group that was considered a cause of the division. He paid for his own travel so that he could read a letter signed by these regional leaders in his tribe who are declaring unity in the name of Christ. In some cases, the coming of Jesus causes division, but it also can be a means of believers, neighbors, and family, turning towards each other in Christ's love and service.

What brings division? Is it Jesus who brings division or is it the fact that he is all consuming (or should be) in your life? He reaches out and takes all of you, including your sins and burns them up like a wildfire consumes the dry tinder in a rain-thirsty forest.

Written in Jeremiah 23:29a – "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord." Jesus brings fire to the earth, the fire of the Word of God that sparks both love and justice, a fire that travels and "draws the Son of God not just to the brink of death, but into the darkness of death, only to be brought back to life again."

Why did Jesus talk of such a holy and deadly purpose? Jesus spoke of it because it was done for you. The fire of Jesus comes to burn away your sins and all that is left is a new life saved through the grace of the Son of God.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that 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, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:1-2)

Helpful Resources – quotes and ideas:

- Sermon Nuggets
- Brian Stoffregen
- Sarah Dylan