

# **“Interpreting the Present Time”**

## **Jeremiah 23:23-29 & Luke 12:49-56**

### **August 15, 2010**

In the comic strip Beetle Bailey the chaplain is standing in the pulpit. Before beginning his sermon he shares this introduction, "Today my sermon will be short and sweet." From the congregation there is heard a single voice echoing the loud cry of "Hallelujah!" The chaplain inquires, "Was that for short or for sweet?"

It is a cute cartoon - but more than that it is really an interesting question. What is it that you think people want more, a short sermon or a sweet one? My suspicion is that, no matter how often we kid around about sermons being too long, the fact is that what we really want is a sermon that is sweet. We can sit through long orations if what is being said makes us feel good. But even a very brief word that makes us uncomfortable, condemns or calls our lifestyle into question is enough for us to turn on the speaker.

Jeremiah experienced that over and over again. I suspect that Jeremiah was not the most diplomatic of preachers. He was direct and forceful in his message and often times that message condemned and passed judgement. I don't know how short his sermons were but I know that they were not always very sweet. The gist of it was, 'You have sinned - unless you change your life and turn to God you will face the judgement.' Not sweet enough for sure - and the people rejected Jeremiah and tried to stop his preaching and even tried to put him to death.

Still, Jeremiah believed that what he said was God's word. He believed that God was a God who was close enough to the people to know what was really going on in their lives and still far enough removed to see and understand the big picture. God knew and Jeremiah delivered the message that he believed God wanted the people to hear. Unfortunately for Jeremiah, at the same time other 'prophets' continued to say nothing but sweet [short] and encouraging things.

Do you want it short or sweet? We would probably be quick to say, 'We want both.' But the word of the Lord says, "Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" Not exactly words that would indicate that it is all going to be really sweet ..... And we won't even talk about how long it might be.

We do love the 'good news'. "Jesus love me this I know - for the Bible tells me so." Talk about grace, forgiveness, love and eternal life all are at the heart of the Gospel and our faith. They will always be the themes that run through the word we receive from God because they are words that describe the very nature of God. Yet, it would be inappropriate to fail to acknowledge the harsher words that call us to make difficult choices in our lives - words that point us to the fact that there is a deep darkness in the world that we can easily get lost in. There is danger when we slowly turn away from God. When we try to remain faithful in a world that discounts God there will be divisions among people. And we need to remain diligent in watching for the signs of the approaching storms.

The Gospel text today is harsh. It is not the sweet, sweet word that we want to hear. In fact, it seems out of character when we remember the many words of peace and love that are so typical. Just last week we focused on the words "Have no fear little flock - it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!" But today the word is: "I came to bring fire to the earth

.....” And as if that is not scary enough, Jesus immediately goes into a discussion of how families will be divided and torn apart.

I read an article about a sociology professor who every year begins his course on "The Family" by reading to his class a letter, from a parent, written to a government official. In the letter the parent complains that his son, once obedient and well motivated, has become involved with some weird new religious cult. The father complains that the cult has taken over the boy's life, has forced him to forsake all of his old friends, and has turned him against his family. After reading the letter, the professor asks the class to speculate what the father is talking about. Almost without exception, the class immediately assumes that the subject of the letter is a child mixed up with the "Moonies," or some other controversial group. After the class puts out all of the possible conclusions they can think of, the professor surprises them by revealing that the letter, was written by a third century father in Rome to the governor of his province, complaining about this weird religious group called "The Christians."

What Jesus is suggesting is that faithfulness to God will put you at odds with the world. Faithfulness to God may even put you at odds with your own family. It happens anytime a person chooses not to go with 'the flow.' 'The flow' so often seems to be toward the darkness and away from God. Are we aware of that? Can we see when the storm clouds gather? Still the call is to be faithful because it is the life that leads to life.

I read about a teenage girl at summer camp was torn between two sets of friends. Some of them were sunbathing on the dock, saying to her "stay with us." But her other friends were in a rowboat saying "no, come with us." There she stood, one foot on the dock, the other foot on the edge of the boat, and the boat was moving. Trying to appease everyone, trying to not decide, she ended up falling into the water; and worse, her hair got wet!

Where will we stand? Will we stand with Christ? Or will we go with the flow?

Can we read the signs of the times as well as we interpret the coming weather by looking at the clouds that gather on the horizon? It was interesting to read a newsletter I receive that talked about the changes going on in our culture. It talked about a time 50 years ago when everyone seemed to accept that there was a certain moral order that shaped our world and by which we needed to live. But a change has taken place and we no longer accept that there is one external moral set of values. Now, more and more, the moral order of life is seen as something that we each determine by what we find inside ourselves. The author referred to people turning to there own 'imperial self.' I am king - I set the rules - I decided how to live and what is right and wrong for me.

I thought of that image as I considered the words of Jesus in our Gospel text for today. Is that where we are going as a culture? Is that where we are going individually? It is not easy to interpret the signs of the present age. But what is clear is that we can not stand with one foot on the dock and the other on the side of the boat that is moving out onto the lake. We can not follow all of our own desires and yet follow God. It may not always be comfortable to follow God. Still the fire burns calling us to faith. Still it is faith in God that is the path to life.

AMEN