

Weightless and Unburned

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

Last weekend I got a call from my daughter who lives in Colorado that started with, “I’m fine mom, everything is fine. Don’t worry. I am fine and we are safe”. ... And I immediately felt calmed. ...Right! It turned out that there was a wildfire approaching her home, she has been put on a pre-evacuation warning and was headed out to help friends who were on an immediate evacuation order to get out. A few days later the fire was in hand, and she was back home. But, in Colorado, most people keep go-bags ready because wildfires are a huge concern. It might seem counter-intuitive, but land management conservationists recommend the practice of controlled burns to prevent catastrophic wildfires. Fires are a normal part of natural eco-systems. However, with increasing human populations moving into forest spaces, to avoid the loss of life and property, most areas simply extinguishing **ALL** fires. Over time, deadfall and underbrush accumulate to the point that when fires do ignite, they burn hotter, killing the trees instead of just quickly purging the undergrowth. If employed, a well-executed prescribed burn can reduce harmful disease, restore eco-systems, and improve wildlife habitats. Fire itself, when used well, can be restorative instead of purely destructive.

Likewise, in Biblical imagery, fire is often pictured as purging away sin and potentially dangerous excess. Unfortunately, Dante got hold of the metaphor and the world has been in terror since. But what his vision of the inferno forgets is who God is and who we are. God is the life-giver. We are image bearers of the one who gives life to the world. Jesus is the healer. Our identity and purpose have been stolen by sin, but Jesus came to restore us, and through us restore the world.

The New Testament imagery of fire has been so misused that we have difficulty hearing it without feeling immediate terror. Looking back to the Hebrew Bible, in this case, may be

beneficial. Do you recall the Hebrew slaves' escape from Egypt, how they followed the glory cloud which became a pillar of fire that led them through the sea into freedom? God was in that "shekinah" glory. It was God's fire that led, protected, and preserved them into the Promised Land. Recall then, the brightness that shone from Moses' face when he would meet with God in the tabernacle? That glory shone so brightly through Moses that the people made him cover himself afterwards. Remember Daniel and his friends in the fiery furnace, held in the grip of the fire, unsinged, and protected? When we get to the New Testament and the Day of Pentecost, that same fire will rest on the heads of the disciples as God's Spirit came into them for the first time. God's fire is not meant to terrify us. It is meant to comfort and empower us. But we first must remember who we are and what we are here to do; otherwise, we will find ourselves in conflict with God and our own identity, and that is when fire becomes threatening.

In the very beginning, God placed humans in an abundant garden, full of everything we needed to sustain our bodies with nourishment and our souls with beauty and entrusted humans to care for it. Since then, sin has warped so much, but our purpose remains. Now we live in a world broken by injustice and greed, but we are still entrusted with the task of preserving beauty and provision for everyone to enjoy. Knowing the Life-Giver and tending God's provision is our purpose, our identity, and our destiny.

Today's Old Testament texts both illustrate courtrooms with God standing as the judge. In Jeremiah, God is pronouncing judgment against false prophets. In Psalm, the judgment is against false gods. In both instances, those in power had used their position to warp God's message. Not only did they fail to fulfill their purpose, but they also used their positions to confuse people's understanding of God. Because of their teaching, powerful people would believe justice would never catch up with them, and the weak would believe they had been abandoned by God. Because of their failure, God's name would be forgotten by God's people. Both the false prophets and the false gods were accused of leading people

further away from their true identity, and ultimately away from their ability to participate with God in the restoration of this world.

In both these texts, we understand that power and authority are temporary. In Jeremiah, God's pronouncement says, "is not my word like a fire"? The fire of God's Word will burn away their false teaching. Then in the Psalm, God reminds the false gods that they will not be preserved from the same fate they inflicted on the poor. In God's kingdom, God's fire is a gift; it burns away the things that keep us from God. God is the Creator of our world. We have been entrusted with its care, and in the end, God will restore all things. Anything not dedicated to the care and restoration of God's beloved creation will be consumed by God, who is the Consuming Fire. If fire feels fearsome because of what we risk losing, we're holding on to perishable things.

When we hear Jesus say that he came to bring fire to the earth, we must remember it was Jesus who was speaking. Jesus, not Dante. Jesus, the defender of the children, the one whose gentle touch healed lepers, and fed the hungry. The fire he was so eager to bring to earth was the shekinah glory of God, the force that would empower his disciples to take his message into the world, to feed the hungry, heal the broken, restore the hurting, and give us all back our true identity. He had to die first, be resurrected, and ascend to God before the fire of God could come into humans.

Jesus came because sin corrupted God's beautiful design. So, when Jesus talks about the inevitable division his message would cause on this earth, he was reminding us of the insidiousness of sin. God is the one who designed families. God loves families. Jesus did not desire the division of families. But sin has cause people to forget their identity, to misunderstand their purpose. False prophets and false idols have confused God's beloved children. We live in a world where people have forgotten that we exist to tend this earth and serve one another so we misuse and abuse others for our own gain.

When Jesus said he came to cause division, he understood that his message would not be easy to accept. He was calling his followers to give up their very lives. Asking people to neglect their own interests in favor of caring for outcasts is not a popular message. It would be divisive, even among families. Jesus himself knew and trembled at the cost. But those who know their true identity will make sacrifices to fulfill their purpose, to participate in the purposes of God. For some, the division of family will be the sacrifice required to uphold the priorities of God.

Fire is fearsome only when we fear what it will burn away. For those who see the fire of God's glory as healing and empowering, it is something to run towards. Our reading from Hebrews gives a lengthy list of the saints who ran towards God's purposes. Rather than fire imagery, this author describes athletes running a race. They shed excess sin and weight to more successfully achieve their goal. They understood who they were and embraced their purpose wholeheartedly. They kept their eyes fixed on their destination, liberated from distraction. These saints were filled with the fire of God's presence, consumed by God, running through peril to fulfill their purpose, without fear because they were holding onto nothing that conflicted with their purpose. They are a model for us. Their presence among us is bolstering. In fact, their stories were accomplished for us. And it will be with us that one day we will all be made perfect together. The saints listed here were the inspiration for the early church martyrs, and we too will be an inspiration for the saints who come after us.

We are saints. We are members of the cloud of witnesses. We run our race in the glory cloud with God's presence, emblazoned by the fire of that spirit within us. We live to accomplish God's purposes through us. Yet we live in a broken world marred by the deceitfulness of sin. Sin's message beckons us to uphold our own comfort and safety while ignoring the cries of the desperate.

And so, may we be a people who continually allow God's work of controlled burns in our lives, willingly laying aside all that does not serve us in performing God's healing work of love and justice on this earth.