

*We bring swords that you turn into plowshares.
We bring expectations of peace and you meet us with swords.
God help us.
Amen.¹*

Did you hear those readings? Anyone else want to preach today? I am struggling with these readings. Because I *always* want to preach good news, reconciliation, and peace. Because I always want to send you out of here feeling good. Don't the lessons for today contradict the message we have heard and want to hear from the one whose mercy is endless, and whose very being is love? We can't ignore or make today's lessons more palatable because of our discomfort with them.

The question posed in Jeremiah is haunting: Is not my word like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? The author of Hebrews reminds us of those who have gone before us and suffered when they responded to God's Word by faith. When we listen to the stories of faith heroes we see that faith is not something one has or holds, but a force that compels. By faith, Abraham set out for a place unknown. By faith he prepared himself to sacrifice his son. By faith Samson shut the mouth of a lion. Others quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness. We are given examples of nameless people who struggle, end up wearing goatskins, and *being sawed in two*.

This is meant to be an argument for faith? Would this convince you to sign up?

Then in Luke, Jesus talks about bringing fire to the earth, and pitting generations of families against each other. Jesus, who admits he's tremendously stressed, says to us "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" Do you think I've come to make your life nice? Think again. Jesus often speaks like a man who is both thrilled about and tormented by the mission ahead of him.

Jesus lived in a world which screamed for liberation, where relationships needed restructuring and values needed reprioritizing --- the same world we live in. The Fire of which he spoke is meant to lead to conflict which then breaks open the opportunity for transformation, liberation, healing, justice. In frustration Jesus shouts at the crowds around him: "Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" and to us I hear him say, "How can YOU ignore the great needs for transformation in the world? At what cost do you purchase peaceful lives for yourselves?" Questions like that will at the very least shake us up a bit, and at most could break our lives apart like hammers break rocks into pieces.

The word of God, the breaking in of the Kingdom of God, is always divisive because it demands difficult decisions. Discipleship has a cost. **And we don't get to name our own price.**

Annie Dillard suggests this about the dangerous life of faith: *It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and draw us out to where we can never return.*² That sounds a bit extreme, don't you think? But extreme faith fuels the fire transformation. Extreme faith pushes us up against powerful institutions, has us confront formidable people, and flies in the face of values people hold dear. Is **that** the faith to which we are called, this radical way of aligning oneself with the kingdom which will only get us into trouble and cause heartbreak in our families?

¹ Hawker, Katherine. from www.liturgyoutside.net, 2006.

² Dillard, Annie. *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row, 1982.

After the beautiful nativity scene of baby Jesus in the arms of his adoring mother, Jesus was taken to the temple. An old man of faith, Simeon held the baby in *his* arms and told his mother Mary: "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, and a sword will pierce your own soul too."³

I used to think Simeon was foretelling Mary's witness of Jesus death, but the truth is Jesus broke Mary's heart early and often in his ministry. Jesus was constantly clashing with the reigning symbols of the first century culture in which both he and his mother lived. Throughout his ministry he redefined those things most precious to the people around him ---- and not just the evil people, but the good people too, especially those who loved him. He forced them to consider how the following things might be different in the reign of God: treasure, peace, the Sabbath, security, food, and even family. He made more enemies than friends, and the friends he did make ---- kept him away from his family, and even they could not keep him out of trouble.

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus' family approached his friends because they thought he was not taking care of himself and might even be a little crazy. Jesus friends told him his brothers and sisters were outside to see him ---- he turned and said --- what brothers and sisters and mother are you talking about? ⁴ Talk about a sword which pierces a mother's soul! Long before his lifeblood was shed, he paid the price of his personal happiness. And that of his family as well.

People of faith, especially those of us born into "the faith" in western culture, become complacent and very comfortable with our place in the world and in our faith. I tell myself I'm not greedy: The list of what I want is pretty reasonable. Deep down I want to be fulfilled, happy and safe. Oh, and I want that for my entire family too. And of course, I would like world peace. Really, is that too much to ask?

Jesus says in this morning's gospel that we can't count on ***having any of that***. We have made faith comfortable. But Jesus didn't. Jesus knew the tension between what's good for himself as an individual, as a member of a family and what's good for the kingdom. It is a constant struggle between demands of God and family and self, as well as the struggle between good and evil. And if that's not stressful for you, as Jesus admits was for him, it should be. Because faith and fire should be considered dangerous and must not allow us to relax.

So what have we learned about faith? Faith will get you into trouble. Faith will cause you to struggle. Faith will strain your most cherished relationships. *Where is the good news in this?*

The author of Hebrews recounts struggles not to frighten us, but to convince us that we are not alone in this path we take. The writer visualizes us in a race --- not a competition, but a struggle --- with spectators who are cheering us on. Jesus himself has both started and finished that race, pioneered and perfected the life of faith we undertake. We are not alone in our fear, or the joy, or our weariness. We not only follow in the footsteps of the great patriarchs, we dash directly through a cloud of witnesses whose faces blur along the sidelines

I leave you with no easy answers for the week ahead. Only a prayer that God's word will always cause you discomfort as well as peace and that you may find reassurance in knowing that Jesus said it would be like this. And that none of us are alone in this life of faith. THAT is good news.

³ Luke 2:32

⁴ Mark 3:21, 31-35