

August 14, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Jeremiah 23:23-29; Luke 12:49-56

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue

"Our Lord Jesus Christ is not tame, not nice," began the sermon, and then the preacher's voice trembled as he paraphrased Jesus' words: "I have come to bring fire to this earth." Ten years later, I can still hear that tremble—perhaps because the voice belonged to Gordon Lathrop, whose theology I had always regarded as steadfast. Maybe in that moment I imagined a similar tremble in Jesus' voice, not from lack of nerve but from depth of fully human feeling.

Or perhaps I recall Lathrop's voice because it so audibly captured the gravity of Jesus' terrible words. What kind of savior would bring division instead of peace, would deliberately separate family members? What kind of God would bring fire to the earth?

These questions are not merely abstract. Jesus' fire imagery is disturbingly concrete. When I worked as a hospital chaplain I experienced the look and smell of human flesh destroyed by fire. I witnessed the torturous tedium of the layers of healing that happen with human skin, painstakingly slowly, after it has been burned. Nearly every burn victim I came to know addressed, directly and courageously, the question of God's role in causing the fire that harmed them. None found easy answers.

Fire is a dangerous image for Jesus to use, even if he doesn't mean it literally. No wonder his voice trembles, at least in my imaginative rendering of the scene.

What kind of God would bring fire to the earth? Jeremiah offers an answer, albeit a terrifying one in the form of a rhetorical question: "Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off?" The implied answer is a resounding no. God is far off, so far off that a few verses later Jeremiah proclaims, "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" This God is not tame, not nice. Perhaps it's for the best that this God stay far away from us.

But the frightening truth is that God doesn't stay far away. The divine fire and division and hammer are incessantly in our midst. Not always a literal fire that burns forests or flesh. Not the exact social divisions that Jesus predicts, with first-century

family members fighting over a controversial religious leader's impact on the norms of their kinship group. Not necessarily a divine hammer that smashes up rocks as a show of power, destroying purely for the sake of destruction. But God's enkindling fire is with us, burning up whatever is harmful or superfluous. And God's word hammers away at the hardened structures by which we cause others harm.

Where do we see this burning, this shattering, happening in our own lives and congregations? Where do we think it ought to happen? It's worth naming those things that need to be destroyed in order for new life to grow. Those who feel alienated from institutionalized religion might be particularly adept at such discernment. But it's also God's call to those of us who continue to make up the church.

The presence of God's fire on the earth is cause for fear and trembling, but perhaps also for celebration. There's relief in knowing that the things that are too terrible for us to fix, too unwieldy for us to harness, and too tough for us to eliminate will be taken on by someone far more powerful. One of my divinity school professors used to say wryly, "If we could save ourselves, then the crucifixion was a massive overreaction on God's part." But the crucifixion wasn't an overreaction. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross—the baptism with which he had yet to be baptized when he spoke harshly with the disciples that day, his voice trembling—is in fact the fire that purifies us, the Word that destroys the worst in us, the division that sets us apart from the status quo and calls us continually to be made new.

Jesus calls his listeners hypocrites, claiming that they don't know how to interpret the signs of the times. We may be no better at interpreting our own time. How is God's work manifest among the poor, the despised, the hopeless? How is grace present in the places that most challenge us? What might the gospel mean for those who are hammered or burned by our ways of living?

We don't have all the answers to these questions, except to say that the easiest answer is usually the wrong one—and thus we will always be, in some sense, hypocrites. But we know at least one thing more than Luke's crowds know when they stand face to face with Jesus and hear the tremble in his voice as he predicts his baptism by fire. We know that Jesus' fiery baptism is followed by a resurrection.

Entering into the fire with us, Jesus then emerged from it resurrected. This fact doesn't eliminate the reality of ongoing human suffering, nor does it make God seem any tamer. But it carries us through our own fires with a promise that at the

other end is healing and new life. And that, too, is something worth trembling over.