

**Jeremiah 23:23-29 • Hebrews 11:29--12:2 • Luke 12:49-56**

Following Jesus is complicated. Certainly, there are those who think otherwise; the “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it” crowd, for example. Ironically, I find that sort of thinking naggingly *unsettling* and I have a hard time feeling good about those who think that being a follower of Jesus is all settled, or settling—because following Jesus is *complicated*.

Anyone paying attention to these strange and unsettling texts can easily connect the dots to the complications of life in Christ. There is a long list of choices this morning. You can compare the Word of God to a refining fire or a hammer in Jeremiah. You can be burned, or crushed. Not the sort of thing that usually makes its way on to stitched samplers that are hung in your dining rooms.

There is a catalogue of calamities suffered by the martyrs from the book of Hebrews. Take your choice: mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment, stoning, sawing, swording, destitution, persecution, torment. These things all sound complicated.

And then there’s the gospel. Sometimes I think I should exercise more care in looking over the texts, before saying “yes” to supply preaching. These words of Jesus recorded in Luke are certainly high on my list of things I wish Jesus had never said.

“I came to bring fire to the earth. Do you think I came to bring peace? No, I tell you, but rather division: from now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, and in-laws against each other.

I’ve not seen a stained-glass window engraved with that passage. I don’t know of a choral work written on this text. If there’s a musical setting of “father against son, daughter against mother,” I’ve missed it. It’s not the sort of text that brings one a sense of serenity or ease. Quite the contrary. Because: following Jesus is complicated.

I’m just back in Seattle after a six-week stint serving a congregation in Big Sky, Montana while their pastor there was on sabbatical, and I’m here to tell you, I drained every ounce of wonder out of those six weeks that I possibly could. That included a float trip on the Gallatin River. And while I’m up to adventure, I’m not without *some* sense. So, I signed up for the “calmest” of the three options; cruising down the river on a Sunday afternoon is what I was after.

And I did get that chance, but only for about 10 minutes. The rest of the three

hours was thumping and bumping and being tossed around mercilessly while the guide yelled mostly inaudible instructions, like “Paddle left!” or “Lean right!”

And then it happened, of course, we hit a rock, and four of the six of us in the little craft went overboard into the Gallatin. (I’m pleased to tell you, I stayed in the boat.)

I found myself thinking more times than you can imagine how much that three-hour float trip was a lot like life itself. And about in those proportions. We get about 10 minutes of cruising down the river and then BAM! Out of nowhere, unforeseen hazards throw us into the deep: heart attack, suicide, diabetes diagnosis, abortion politics, shredded documents, election deniers winning elections; homelessness, unsolved and seemingly unsolvable; gas prices falling only to be replaced by skyrocketing food and rent costs; family dysfunction; the future of the church in limbo; free-floating anxiety – shall I go on?

Life! Life itself is complicated.

And Jesus is not naive. Jesus entered fully into human life. He didn’t come to live on some quasi-human fringe. His is no cruise down the river on a Sunday afternoon. Instead, Jesus floats the uncharted waters of touching the leper, eating with sinners, challenging authorities, raising more questions than he answers. His is a life lived in the rapids, among unforeseen hazards with few resources for rescue or reprieve.

In the end, as you know, his life among us, cost him *his* life. He laid it all on the line so that we won’t have to. So that our moments of complication and consternation will, if nothing else, be lived in the company of one who’s been there.

“I came to bring fire to the earth,” and how He wishes it were already kindled. The fire that Christ comes to offer in our complicated, chaotic lives is the fire of endurance. It is a fire that, kindled by the power of the Holy Spirit, gives us any hope at all. For there will be days – there are days for whatever reason – when father and son *are* divided, mother and daughter no longer see eye to eye. There are days when we get burned like straw, or hammered like a rock. We are among so great a cloud of witnesses as those who are being mocked, flogged, chained, in prison, stoned, sawn, or threatened by the sword.

And even though we might elude those complications here high atop Queen Anne Hill, if we believe in the communion of saints at all, then we are being assailed every day. Somewhere, someone in the world is being punished for the faith that we often so casually enjoy.

Life is complicated. Faith is complicated. Christ is complicated. Following Him in

uncertain and unpredictable times is more complicated still. And Jesus wants us to be aware. Ready. Always walking in his good company.

This is the fire that he comes to kindle, the baptism he so longs to accomplish. And He through change and chance will guide us: the only good, the only true.

When the chips are down, Jesus will always, *always*, be the help of we who cannot help ourselves. And when all other helpers betray our trust, when the hammer of his presence crushes all our false towers and temples to dust, when the complications go beyond what we can handle or bear, He alone, Jesus, will save us from the ashes of these complicated lives.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.