

## Sermon: A Holy Restlessness

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Family is such an important source of joy, but also an inescapable cause of pain and annoyance. I am speaking about not just nuclear family but also extended ones.

During the past few weeks, Daisy and I (and the boys) had the pleasure of visiting my in-laws in Vancouver. It has been almost three years since I last saw them, due largely to the pandemic. Thankfully they are well and healthy. Daisy has three other siblings, living mostly in the west coast (Vancouver, San Fransisco and Portland). Along with their spouses and children (two in each family), our gathering was 18 people in all. It was a nice joyful occasion seeing all my nephews and nieces, all growing up so fast. We rented a beach house along the Sunshine Coast and really enjoyed our time together—a very much appreciated vacation with the extended family.

But it took a lot of work in the background, on the part of Daisy and her siblings, as they tried to negotiate and navigate the COVID protocol and vaccination status of each family. You see, some of my in-laws are very much in the camp of anti-vaxxer and anti-masker, while others are extremely COVID vigilant. Daisy is more of the practical, middle-of-the-road type, playing the role of conciliator, a peacekeeper between her siblings and their spouses. I really did not get involved in those heated discussions via text, email, and FaceTime, but it was a hoot watching her trying to hash out an acceptable compromise prior to our arrival in Vancouver.

A real valiant effort on her part that really kept the peace while we were all there in-person. It was only a two-week stay anyway for most of us, so the least we could do is to bite our tongues and play nice, and thankfully we all did. No one talked about COVID nor the politics of COVID while we were together. No one was offended nor walked out in protest. We all kind of crossed our fingers and hoped for the best.

Knowing the background effort it took on the part of Daisy, it has given me a new-found appreciation for her role not just as a peacekeeper, but a peacemaker in this extended family. Which is why the words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading in Luke 12 have given me pause, and should give all of us pause, as Jesus asked rhetorically, "*Do you think that I have*

*come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"* (Luke 12:51). As if intending to drive his point further and clearer, Jesus added,

*"From now on five in one household will be divided,  
three against two and two against three; they will be divided:  
father against son and son against father,  
mother against daughter and daughter against mother,  
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law  
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."* (Luke 12:52-53)

What is going on here? Isn't Jesus supposed to bring 'peace on earth' as announced by the angels at his birth? What kind of saviour would bring division instead of peace, would deliberately sow division among family members? What kind of God would cast fire upon the earth and frame it theologically as a baptism with which all of us would be baptized?

Taking this text in dialogue with today's Old Testament reading in Jeremiah 23, we come to encounter Jesus as a true prophet. Not those prophets of peace who prophesy lies in God's name, or those who prophesy deceit of their own heart, in the guise of dreams and visions. Rather, Jesus is a fire-and-brimstone kind of prophet, who is not afraid to name his reality in his own time.

To understand this prophet, we need to place him in the context of 1st century Judaism under the Roman Empire. You see, at that time, religious patriarchy was the norm, the rule. A household was organized tightly under the rule of the 'Ab', or the the Father. Strict obedience and loyalty was demanded from everyone, family members and slaves alike, under the rule of that 'Ab'. Harsh punishment was given out to the wayward, with outcast being the most sever of all.

Adding to this system of families and kins, the greatest 'Ab' on earth was the High Priest, who exerted total control over all aspects of life in Judaism. To be outside of it was to be outside of God's covenantal promise, of God's providential care, or as a good law-abiding Jew would call it, 'the Gentiles' (in the most denigrating sense).

Yet Judaism, with its overt emphasis on the Law (letters not the spirit) was leading God's people astray—*"these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me..."*, says the Lord (Isaiah 29:13).

It was to this reality that Jesus spoke harshly to his disciples, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” A superficial peace would ensure the continuation of the kind of faith whereby people worship God with their lips but not with their hearts, whereby people obey the Lord out of fear not out of love. What we see in the Scriptures is Jesus who did not shy away from naming hard realities in hard terms. What we see in the Scriptures is our Saviour preparing his flock to brace for the inevitable—separation from Judaism, with a new way emerging.

Here is a theological truth: **hard truth and honesty about brokenness is the ground upon which real hope stands.** The shattering of a superficial peace, even through division, was necessary whereby faith in Christ could emerge as the way, the truth and the life, and truly we are all better for it.

Yet description is not prescription—naming a hard reality does not mean division is always the answer. Just because Jesus says something does not mean that the content of his statement is automatically a good thing. A major part of what we are called to do is to interpret the present time, just as Jesus did in his own time.

In my opinion, division or rather divisiveness is the scourge of our time. We have all seen how divisive politics is tearing the United States apart, from within. We should understand that the Canadian society is not immune from that type of divisiveness. We know how division in a congregation could crumble a once vibrant ministry. Some of us may have unfortunately experienced deep and lasting division in our own families. It is painful to watch, painful to endure and painful to heal.

In this present time, three major issues gnaw away at my own heart, and perhaps yours as well. First, the war in Ukraine where thousands have perished and millions are displaced. Its impact on two major commodities, namely oil and grain, is being felt far and wide across the globe, and yet the world is not united against Putin’s war of aggression.

Second, climate catastrophe due to CO2 emission, which has been studied, debated and forecasted for years, is now rearing its ugly head. Scorching heat is currently blanketing parts of Europe and Great Britain. Forest fires are burning out of control in many parts of the world, including Canada, and yet the world is far from united to truly bring emission level down by fundamentally altering our ways of life.

Third, but not least, is our country's own record in caring for those living on the margin. Witness the latest efforts by municipal authorities in clearing out homeless encampment in various cities. Or the deplorable living condition of many indigenous communities across Canada.

In all these issues, I won't pretend to know what the solution is or should be, but divisiveness is definitely not the answer. Rather, like-minded individuals and groups will need to come together and work together for the common good, and for life to not just endure but to eventually flourish.

The words of Jesus (and of Jeremiah) may not provide us with a catch-all solution to problems of our time, but they ought to stir within us a sense of restlessness. A restlessness that forces us to ponder if and when that holy cleansing fire comes, are we the wheat or the straw? Are we to be scattered and burned like chaffs, or will we and our work endure?

Such restlessness, which I shall call it a '**holy restlessness**', does not hinge upon our own fear or anxiety, but rest entirely upon the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. When Jesus spoke to the disciples that day, of his baptism by which he had yet to be baptized, he speaks of the holy fire that baptizes and purifies each and everyone of us, of the Word that destroys the worst in us, of the division that sets us apart from the unacceptable status quo.

Such **holy restlessness** calls us forth continually to be made new. Nevertheless, the fiery baptism of Jesus is eventually followed by a resurrection. Entering into the fire with us, on our behalf, Jesus then emerged from it resurrected. Knowing this does not eliminate the hard reality of our current human sufferings, nor does it make the holy fire any tamer. But it does carry us through our own fire, with a hope that at the other end is healing, reconciliation and life transformed.

**In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**