

When I first saw that these were today's scripture readings, I groaned. Honestly, I was hoping for something a bit less strident, just a bit lighter in tone and context. We could certainly use that. I imagine Jesus' followers were thinking the same: swords, fire, division. Holy Moly!

Perhaps we can find some comfort in the opening of Jeremiah today...

Am I a God nearby, says the Lord, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? Do I not fill heaven and earth? (Jer. 23:23)

These rhetorical questions remind us of the nature and character of God. This is God, the One who is near to us, filling the earth and heavens with Presence, knowing us, in whatever place and condition we are found. And God is near, even when we are unable or unwilling to see the signs.

Jeremiah goes on to caution us about false prophets. *"Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully."* God's Word is not to be twisted to fit a human agenda or reduced to a prop in someone else's drama. God will not settle for being dumbed down or domesticated.

And God has expectations of us. When we lose faithfulness to the Word, we lose the ability to tell fact from fiction, and we are but lost and wandering children. Ours is a God who not only desires, but expects, our trust and devotion to God's kingdom of justice, peace, and righteousness.

This is where Luke's text hits us today. Jesus speaks of peace, conflict, and division: *"Do you think I have come to bring peace? No, I tell you, but rather division... to kindle fire on the earth."* Just as God refuses to be domesticated, Jesus refuses to let us settle for a shallow, "just trying to keep the peace" kind of peace.

We all know what "keeping the peace" looks like — avoiding hard conversations so nobody gets upset, biting our tongues at the dinner table, smiling politely when our gut says, "this isn't right." That kind of peace is merely conflict avoidance in a nice outfit. Jesus isn't asking us to be peacekeepers. He's asking us to be peacemakers. And peacemaking almost always means stepping into the mess with truth and love.

Wouldn't it have been fascinating to be a fly on the wall when Jesus said these things? The reactions then were probably not so different from ours now. *Perhaps today, instead of Jesus, Prince of Peace, we meet Jesus, Disturber of the Peace.*

Because here's the thing — keeping the peace usually protects the status quo. It keeps the powerful comfortable and the vulnerable silent. Jesus wasn't crucified because he was a nice guy urging everyone to "just get along." He was crucified because he told the truth, and the truth disrupted the false peace that injustice depended on.

Yet isn't this the same Jesus who proclaimed the Shalom of God, who preached "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be children of God*"? At the Last Supper, he told his disciples, "*My peace I leave with you, my own peace I give to you.*" And don't we, in our own Baptismal vows, promise to "strive for justice and peace"?

We are a people committed to peace — but peace isn't easy. There is no shortage of conflict in our world — between nations and peoples, races and ethnicities, religions and ideologies. And here, if we are paying attention, Jesus seems to place division, not war, as the opposite of peace.

Our baptism calls us to be peacemakers, actively working toward peace and healing. When Jesus speaks of division, he calls out just how deeply the powers of this world are ingrained **in us**. It's ironic that when you Google "peacemaker," the first hits are weapons and warfare — as though the only way to peace is through destruction.

Jesus knows that God's peace exposes what's broken. It calls out lies, greed, violence, and division. And when that happens, people get uncomfortable. Families argue. Communities split. That's not failure; that's what it looks like when the kingdom of God collides with the kingdoms of this world.

Jesus gives us an inconvenient Gospel. The way of God's kingdom runs counter to the world's logic, and so, following it may well bring conflict into even our most intimate relationships.

Jesus teaches the way the Kingdom of God will come about...

Not by might, but by forgiveness
Not by fear, but by courage
Not by arrogance, but with humility

These words – forgiveness, courage, humility – remind me of a Vacation Bible School I worked on a few years ago. The theme was "God's Heroes." We explored **Heart, Courage, Wisdom, Hope, and Power** through biblical stories, and met community heroes — librarians, fire and rescue professionals, and teachers.

One moment that stands out was when a young officer from the Peterborough, NH, Police Department spoke with our kids. Officer Justin answered questions about the items on his duty belt — gloves, flashlight, handcuffs, taser, pepper spray, and a firearm. Of course, the kids wanted to know about the gun. Over and over, he explained that his primary purpose was to help people and keep them safe. He never talked about "bad people," only about choices, and people who might be struggling.

At one point, a volunteer asked, “What is the most important tool you carry?” He answered, “My words. The way I communicate is the most important way I can help people in any circumstance. How we talk to each other is very, very important.”

I was so impressed by this young man carrying such weighty responsibility, and I thanked God for that witness of **Heart, Courage, Wisdom, Hope, and Power.**

So, how will we respond — and not simply react — to the divisions we experience around us?

Jesus goes on to say, *“You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret the present time?”* We can look at the sky and sense tomorrow’s weather. We know the feel of the air before a snowstorm. But can we, with equal clarity, read the signs of God’s movement around us? The challenge is not just to spot the clouds of conflict, but to see the Kingdom breaking in through them — those moments when God’s Spirit stirs us to speak up, to act, to forgive, to resist the easy way out. Discipleship is as much about attention as it is about action. The “present time” is not abstract — it is here, today. And the Gospel demands that we notice and respond with courage, humility, and love.

We often speak of Baptism and the vows we make. John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus would bring not only water, but fire. Our Gospel today begins with Jesus saying, “I came to bring fire to the earth. How I wish it were already kindled.” Fire can be destructive — and we pray for those who suffer its devastation. But fire can also be purifying.

The giant sequoia relies on fire to release its seeds, to prepare soil, to recycle nutrients, and to open the canopy so light can reach seedlings. Our Baptism is that holy fire of the Spirit, burning away the dross, releasing the seeds of our hearts, growing in us the desire to work for justice and peace.

That’s why “keeping the peace” can never be our goal. If the sequoia grove had its way, it would prefer no fire — just calm, quiet forest floor. But without fire, no new growth comes. In the same way, without the holy disruption Jesus brings, we’d keep recycling the same old patterns, never making room for new life.

So when we speak truth in love, we may lose the false peace of politeness, but we gain the deeper peace of Christ. And that’s the trade Jesus asks of us — to give up comfort for courage, silence for justice, peacekeeping for the fierce, fiery, healing peace of God. As Diocese of Georgia, Bishop Frank Logue said, *“Speaking truth in love is not the division we fear, but the deep peace for which we long.”*

There will always be division in this world. But we pray to know the God who is nearby, not far away, present in all places and times. In that knowledge, may we know the peace that passes all understanding, and find **Heart, Courage, Wisdom, Hope, and Power** to bring about, with God's help, the Kin-dom in our own time and place.

Amen.