

Sermon: "Set Before Us"

Scripture Readings: Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Luke 12:49-56

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Our first reading remembers several of the faithful acts of God: their deliverance from pursuing Egyptian forces, their overcoming of Jericho but the deliverance of one Jericho citizen who received and aided the people of God, and many more, all the while looking forward to the completion and fulfillment of God's promise to them and to us through Christ. Hear now these words from the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11 verse 29 through the second verse of Chapter 12:

*29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. 31 By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. 32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— 38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.*

*1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Our Gospel reading comes in the middle of a long series of teachings. We join in the middle of Jesus speaking to his disciples. Listen for the Word of God to you in these words from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 12, verses 49 through 56.

*49 "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53 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." 54 He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 56 You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"*

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The title of the sermon: “Set Before Us”

*The text: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...” Hebrews 12:1*

Fire to the earth! Here is not a Jesus meek and mild. And not peace, but division! Not calm teaching, but strong words are found here, and stern accusations.

The key here, to beginning to understand, is his final sentence in the passage we’ve just heard. “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky,” he says, “but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”<sup>1</sup> The time, broadly speaking, is the appearance of the Son of God on earth and the momentous occasion of this intervention in human history, the incarnation, the inflection point of the whole human story as it is bent away from hell and toward heaven, away from loss and into salvation. The magnitude of this moment is not understood by his hearers.

And the time, specifically speaking at this point in the Gospel narrative of Luke, is the journey of Jesus toward Jerusalem, the trek toward his crucifixion which he resolutely began several chapters earlier.<sup>2</sup>

“Can you not see what is going on here?” he is asking. “This is no small thing which will leave the world the way I find it, nor leave people comfortable in their places,” he is implying. This truly upends the whole world. And there is certainly no calling for and bringing about a change of course which does not incite conflict. The world is, after all, on a course which Jesus is here to correct and cure, and correction provokes resistance and hostility. The words sound strong, but they prove true: Jesus is actually killed for the better way and saving word he brings to the world.

And he isn’t the only one. Recall our first reading, from Hebrews. It speaks of many of the faithful suffering torture, mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment, stoning, and other gruesome forms of persecution and violence. Surely there is no question that the world is divided by the presence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, when its bringers have been received with such hostility that they are often, to the present day, not even allowed to live.

If we take this uncomfortable text from Luke and stand it purely by itself, we probably do not know what to make of it, and likely see it as threatening. Perhaps it even sounds to us as though Jesus is encouraging warring among us, the faithful dividing themselves out in angry and judgmental opposition against the unfaithful. “Three against two and two against three...father against son... daughter against mother.” This is the kind of thing we sometimes see in the culture around us, as parts of the Christian world misunderstand discipleship as a call to combat against the sinners and the unbelievers. And if we hold theology and faithfulness up as things that really do matter, as I think we all should, then we will sometimes find ourselves drawn toward that mistake, whether in large or small ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:56 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>2</sup> See Luke 9:51.

But the moment we remember that, as Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, “Christ died for the ungodly,” we have to repent of that thinking. Or even more pointedly from Paul, “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”<sup>3</sup> To follow Christ then means to be willing to give our lives for the ungodly, not to set ourselves against whoever we perceive to be ungodly, in judgment and with force. To be disciples of Christ means to be *for*, not *against* those around us.

In fact, the very passage which immediately precedes our Gospel reading for today is a parable that is pretty strongly worded with regard to how we treat those around us. Speaking of a hypothetical scenario in which the master of the house has gone away, “Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives,” Jesus declares. “Truly I tell you,” he goes on, “he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful.”<sup>4</sup>

Those sound like harsh words, too, and they are directed in part against any of us who mistreat the people around us—we’ll be treated as unfaithful for doing this. So again, I say, to be disciples of Christ means to be *for*, not *against* those around us.

It is not ours to choose, though, whether those others are for or against us in return. Jesus came for the sinner on a mission of loving transformation and restoration, and got crucified. His early followers kept to that mission, and many of them got similar treatment. Many of them do still. And that’s what we run up against, described by Jesus clearly in the passage we just heard. If you take up Christ for real, that is—unavoidably—offensive to some.

It doesn’t mean *seeking* to offend; quite the opposite, for doing that is not loving. It does mean faithfully living according to a different way, and speaking for a different way; and a different way on the model of the Kingdom of God is offensive to the forces of falsehood and injustice in a world that desires very strongly to remain untransformed. Bringing conflict is not the goal, but division as Jesus describes nevertheless will result when commitment to the world the way it is comes up against commitment to the world the way Jesus calls it to be.

And so, as both Jesus and the author of Hebrews discuss, when you do commit to this, there will be those who are against you. We all know this is true even in our not-particularly-persecuted lives in today’s United States. Who among us is completely comfortable speaking of Jesus or even visibly and openly being a Jesus follower in front of all those we encounter in our daily lives? Most of us are not entirely, and why? Because we intuitively sense that this sets many people against us in some way. In most cases, only mildly, since in this place and time the consequences we bear are more likely to be eye rolls, cringes, judgment of us as fools, or prejudice against us as one of “those people,” whoever “those people” might be to someone with a low opinion of Jesus-y types.

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<sup>3</sup> See Romans 5:1-11, and specifically verses 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> See Luke 12:35-48; this paragraph is specifically discussing the parable explanation or extension at verses 42-48. Quoted are verses 43-46 as translated in the *NRSV*.

That may be only a weak form of division against us, but if even weak opposition is enough to stop us, I guess that's kind of sad, when we remember what the founders of our faith endured in order to hand it down to us. It's something to think about.

To what is my life a testimony? Is what I stand and affirm in this room on Sunday the true and intentional foundation of all my decisions on Monday? Is it visible and clear to those who come alongside me on Tuesday? Am I faithful still on Wednesday, when it seems my master is delayed in coming? Am I, in faith to one who gave his life for mine, prepared on Thursday to give up even minor luxuries on behalf of someone else? On Friday, do I remember Jesus's warning about interpreting the present time, and recall that God's action in the world in the Gospel is not just something nice to think about but something urgent and immediate? Where does God find me on Saturday?

An interesting thing about the way we heard the matter of perseverance described in the first reading from Hebrews is that the author describes all these difficult and even awful costs to faithfulness, and then makes it all about what? *Joy*. He doesn't say suffering division and conflict is good. He does not say we *earn* salvation by carrying the flag of Christ through a world often hostile to it. He does not use the story of the saints' sufferings as ammunition against the unfaithful, and he does not use it as a dark and miserable call to trudge onward in Christ's name.

No, he speaks of the faithfulness and the price paid by saints gone by in glorious terms, of hope and promise. They did not all receive their full reward as they lived their lives "since God had provided something better." "Therefore," Hebrews goes on, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of throne of God."<sup>5</sup>

How timely the metaphor, surely, to be visualizing perseverance in running a race, here at the time of the Summer Olympics!

This passage does not, despite its discussion of suffering, drag us down into the dumps, but drips with elation, remembering the company that we are in, recalling all of the faithful surrounding us, and exhorts us like them and most of all like Jesus to endure for the sake of joy, to disregard shame for the sake of joy, the joy found in the promise of God. Carry on, we're told, and lay aside that which weighs us down.

For as Jesus implies, this is the time. Now is the time. When else would it be? Can we not interpret the present time, see where this is headed? What will we have lived for in our lives? Only what we live for today, for today is the life we are given to live.

Fred Craddock describes our situation this way: "As the Gospel of John expressed it, Jesus is the crisis of the world. Crisis does not mean emergency but that moment or occasion of truth or decision about life. An adequate image is that of the gable of a house. Two raindrops strike the gable and that moment could conclude with their being oceans apart. To be placed in the situation

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<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 12:1-2 (NRSV).

of decision is critical, for to turn toward one person or goal or value means turning away from another. According to these sayings, God is so acting toward the world in Jesus of Nazareth that a crisis is created, that is to say, Jesus is 'making a difference,' even within families. Peace in the sense of status quo is now disrupted. Historically this has been proven true, and it will be finally true in the eschaton."<sup>6</sup>

This is news which upsets the part of us which would like to remain comfortable *in* the status quo, and live life according to the values the world has told us are important. But deep down we know that the world's comfort does not satisfy in the end. We need something disruptive, and God's entrance onto the world stage in the form of Jesus Christ creates that disruptive crisis which we fear and about which we simultaneously can sing, "Glory, glory, hallelujah." The race is set before us, one which requires endurance but ends with the great hope of all humankind; let us take it up, and run it with perseverance. "O be swift, my soul," proclaim the words of that old-fashioned hymn we will sing as our last hymn today,<sup>7</sup> one of those which wonderfully mixes together the fearful and the hopeful in the way only old-fashioned hymns can do. "Be jubilant, my feet!" it commands. God's truth is marching on, in the present time. May God grant us the awareness and the urgency to see it, faithfulness in taking it up, and perseverance in following it through to the end. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Craddock, Fred; *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke*, 2009, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory," by Julia W. Howe.