

## *Inbound storms*

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*"Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" - Jeremiah 23:29*

*"Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." - Hebrews 12:14*

*Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 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." 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. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 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?" - Luke 12:49-56*

My sources have informed me that at least a few of you wondered about the large moth that was featured on the bulletin cover last Sunday in my absence. Some of you may be similarly puzzled by the apparently secular Japanese block print on this morning's bulletin.

I chose the moth in hopes that it might draw attention to an admittedly small and fleeting but poignant image in the teaching of Jesus from last Sunday's gospel. *"Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* (Luke 12:33-34)



The image on this morning's bulletin shows a storm rolling in over a lake. A solitary individual navigates a small boat along the shore, apparently caught in a squall. He, or she, may have misread the weather. And in today's gospel, Jesus says, *"When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens."* We can imagine the original audience nodding in self-congratulatory agreement – until Jesus turns the knife: *"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?"*

For some of us, the rising storm clouds that may come to mind by way of these words of Jesus may mainly be those overshadowing our own personal lives. We've had a blowup in our household, and we don't know how, when or if ever we will be reconciled. Signs are suggesting that we may always be alone, and we are fearful. Insurance or medical costs may have blown in like a tempest. The streets seem more and more dangerous. We no longer feel common ground with people we once trusted.

Others among us may interpret the rising storm clouds of which Jesus speaks in terms of ominous and dismaying national or global events. Consider the past few days alone: On Wednesday, the stock market took its worst one-day hit of the year. On Thursday, scientists announced that July 2019 was the world's hottest month on record. On Friday, the Trump administration signaled its intention to significantly weaken the 1973 Endangered Species Act, apparently for the sake of even greater prosperity and "progress." Yesterday's news featured a Justice Department brief to the Supreme Court arguing that Title VII federal employment protections should not and do not extend to transgender persons.

With regard to this last matter, some might argue, and believe they are doing so in good faith, that the rights of employers must be safeguarded. Some might argue, and believe they are doing so in good faith, that by removing employment protections for transgender persons Attorney General Barr is honoring God's natural created order. Some might argue, and believe they are doing so in good faith, that this is mainly a cruel instance of the privileged and powerful demonizing and further preying on those who are among the most vulnerable among us.

Illustrative of this vulnerability, you may already know that suicide attempt rates among transgender persons are more than 40% ~ ten times the number in the general population ~ and the percentages are significantly higher for transgender persons who are also persons of color or desperately poor.

Hesitant as I am to litanize from the pulpit some or any of our personal and global troubles and conflicts, we've come this morning to a rough patch in Luke's gospel. Clearly Jesus wants anyone listening to him to feel uncomfortable, to think deeply and faithfully about what unites us with, and divides us from, others. Jesus is partly fathoming the cowardice and courage that compete for our allegiances, both personally and collectively.

We may naturally chafe at this text because we call Jesus the Prince of Peace, because at the heart of our worship is *The Peace*, because we often end our worship with the dismissal, "Go in peace ..." and because in today's lesson from Hebrews we are urged to "*Pursue peace with everyone...*" (12:14) And yet here Jesus startles and challenges us with a contrary theme: "*Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!*" And the division, he says, may well cut right to the heart of your most cherished relationships.

Our Judeo-Christian God is arguably a personal God of tenderness, compassion and peace. And our God is also a meddlesome God whose true prophets and whose true Messiah, Jesus, continuously call us out for our failures and who summon God's people to actively take part in true faith and justice ~ even at the cost of division.

In today's first reading, the prophet Jeremiah, on God's behalf, excoriates the prophets whose messages are dreamy intrigues and false comfort. The truly prophetic word, we are told, is '*like fire*' and '*like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces*?' The rock that awaits such a hammer may be our own personal denial, or our habitual and fearful avoidance of conflict, or our complacency because we are just a little too comfortable, or our holding on to a world that is passing away, or our anxiety about the results of finding our own prophetic voice and taking action.

When it comes to these matters, I gather we all know how much hate and violence and division in the world is due to religion and religious fanaticism ~ inflexible certainty about what is right and wrong. Knowing this causes us to hold back, and it should. In his message at St. James' Cathedral on July 31, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry cautioned us about '*the violence of the spoken word*.'" But then, even so, sometimes after a long gestation, sometimes suddenly, Jesus compels us to words or actions that ruffle feathers and may rupture relationships or worse.

My own message this morning is written in the wake of a homily by Mother Joy Rogers here this past Wednesday. At the Noon Mass we remembered the witness of Jonathan Myrick Daniels. In 1965 he left his studies at an Episcopal seminary to join Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's, peace witness in Selma. He died in a racial confrontation in Hayneville, Alabama, as a result of shielding a 16-year-old girl from a shotgun blast. Mother Rogers ended her Wednesday message by wondering aloud, and chillingly, if, due to the present virulent resurgence of racial hatred, some of us will need to take a bullet so that the gospel of love and justice may remain alive in our time.

Then at the Assumption Mass on Thursday evening, Mother Jackie Cameron challenged us to imagine the Blessed Virgin Mary in league with a group of black mothers on Chicago's South Side who call themselves the *Mothers Against Senseless Killings*. Mother Cameron then challenged us to ask who we are willing and able to be similarly in league with and why for the sake of God's justice. *He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.*

Lately a few of you have noted all of the ominous storm clouds in our present day and asked: "*What can we do as a parish to be more prophetic in the world?*" What can we do? Are there any twelve of us who could reach agreement on how we might make even a small difference in the world that would be a living sign of God's justice?

The normal and natural human response to an inbound storm is to run for cover, protect ourselves, minimize the impact. What if, instead we were storm-chasers? What if we better accepted that crisis and division are meteorologically native to our broken human condition?

With reference to the image on this morning's bulletin cover, I mentioned earlier that the individual in the boat may have miscalculated the weather. But it may be that he or she knows the risky conditions and has chosen to be out there anyway. It may be that the boater has a purpose on the lake that is meaningful enough to continue on even if it means braving a storm. What about us?