

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
July 23, 2017  
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Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, VA

## **The God Who Answers in Fire: Weeds and Wheat**

### *Readings for Proper 11A*

Isaiah 44:6-8

Psalm 86:11-17

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

### **Prayer**

Blessed are You, Lord, Our God, Sovereign of the Universe, The God who Answers in Fire.

### **Sermon**

**My theology.** A first sermon in a new place should do two things: introduce yourself and, of course, preach the Gospel. Let's get one of those out of the way quickly. My name is Kevin. I am the middle child of three. I was born, raised, baptized, and confirmed Roman Catholic before becoming Episcopalian and, years later, pursuing ordination. I live in Falls Church, Virginia with my wife and two sons.

Who am I theologically? Perhaps the best way to do that is to tell you that my favorite bible story is Elijah and the priests of Baal. Two altars are built on Mount Carmel, one to the false god Baal, and one to the Lord. Elijah challenges the false priests: you call upon your god, and I will call upon mine. "The God who answers in fire, let him be God." God shows up for Elijah, and I know that my Redeemer shows up for me—and do so in fire. And so I add "The God who Answers in Fire" to the traditional Hebrew "Blessed are You..." that I learned in seminary. It has become something of a mantra for me.

For me, God is fire, a consuming fire, powerful and redemptive. It's possible that I've just theologized youthful pyromania. Still, it was fire and smoke that led Israel through the desert and tongues of flame that launched the disciples into the world. I welcome a kind of fire and flame. I will put my God up against any idol you have. True/false. Good/bad. Right/wrong. Beauty/ugliness. I was taught to believe in Truth, Justice, Virtue. I have experienced falsehood, injustice, and vice.

Those binaries are real. They are part of the fabric of the universe. God divided light from dark, heaven from earth, the waters above from the waters below. Creation itself was an act of division, distinction. Jesus brings not peace, but a sword; he brings division, he says.

**A troubling Gospel.** But for those of us who've been on the wrong side of someone's binary—gay/straight, male/female, black/white, rich/poor, liberal/conservative, saved/unsaved—today's Gospel presents a problem.

Jesus tells two stories this morning. Hard as it is to believe, both are Good News. Perhaps, the text doesn't strike you this way. Perhaps, Jesus' parable sounds a bit too much like the religious traditions, the denominations, or even parishes you perhaps left behind, the ones you passed on your way here. There's nothing wrong with a world where the good are rewarded for their virtues and drawn to the bosom of a loving Jesus, a world where evil is punished. But we've all been on the wrong end of self-righteousness, at the mercy of people, even good Christians, who take a little too much glee in the punishment part. We abhor these traditions and rightly want little to do with them.

And, moreover, we have friends, even loved ones, of different faiths, of different politics, of different hearts and minds. And we wonder, "Would God really burn them?" And we wonder, "Do I want to be part of something that would say that about them?" And, yet, here is this Gospel where Jesus speaks of a terrible reckoning for the weeds among the wheat, weeds born of evil, destined for binding and burning amid weeping and gnashing of teeth.

**Another perspective.** Jesus tells us two stories this morning. In the first story, God is coming and coming to set the world right. In the second, God is coming and coming for us. Both are Good News. Let those who have ears hear it.

**God alone judges.** Jesus relates the first story to the crowds. The crowd has likely heard stories of the end of days before. The prophets are full of them. Jesus' own rhetoric takes its cues from Ezekiel and Zephaniah, among others, but his story is slightly different. Jesus tells us that the hoped-for master has arrived, so there must be a pause, a breath, a passing of the Spirit before the apocalypse.

See, if you're waiting for deliverance from the evil one, from deliverance from oppression, from poverty, from social ostracism, from a world that's holding you down, the enemy is clear. The servants know the enemy, and they stand ready to uproot systemic evil and personal vice from our midst, root and branch. "We know the enemies—let us eliminate them," the servants say. But the judgment is not theirs to exercise. The land does not belong to them. Jesus' master says, "No, wait, let them grow together, for in uprooting the weeds, the wheat would be compromised. Wait until the harvest to sort them out."

People of different faiths, politics, or ideologies would love to imagine this as lending support to looking down on those different from us, even sanctioning cruelty and violence against them, but this parable has thankfully been read—and rightly so—in the opposite direction. For much of our church's history, this Gospel has promoted toleration. The sorting is done at the harvest, at the end of days, and God, not me, not you, is the first and the last. God alone is God. There is no other rock, as Isaiah reminds us this morning. Whoever would presume to take on God's role will soon find themselves becoming the very thing that they would seek to destroy.

Now just because people are awful to one another doesn't mean that a black-and-white world of good and evil, right and wrong, doesn't exist. It's just as human beings we are horrible at seeing and respecting the distinctions that God has drawn. And God will come to restore those distinctions: to make visible true and false, just and unjust, good and evil.

Make no mistake. God is coming, indeed God has come, to set a broken world right. Justice is coming; justice is here. Do not be afraid. Jesus reassures the people, reassures us, that all that we have read from the prophets has come true: Jesus has arrived to put the world to rights. The kingdom is at hand.

**Evil within and evil without.** Jesus tells a second story to the disciples. In interpreting his parable, Jesus makes his metaphor plain: Jesus is the Son of Man, the hoped-for master. But he adds a warning, a warning that appears in no other Gospel. Jesus tells them: "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This is strange, the only time in the Testament that Jesus' kingdom is spoken of as containing evil. Indeed, God's kingdom is not inaugurated when evil is destroyed. Instead, the Kingdom is inaugurated when God begins to transform and redeem the evil within and without.

As the vanguard of the early Jesus movement, the disciples have heard these stories before. They know the targets of God's wrath: Rome, usurers, Pharisees, among others; and they welcome Jesus' story. "Explain it to us," they say. "Make it plain for us. Give us the order, and we'll take the enemy down." But Jesus responds in what is perhaps yet another parable. If Jesus had intended the weeds to stand in for Romans, usurers, and Pharisees, he would have said as much. Instead, Jesus says the master's reapers are coming for "the stumbling blocks" and "the things which practice lawlessness." Stumbling blocks and lawless powers are not necessarily other people. Rather, they're all around and in everyone.

See, when you think about stories of weeds and wheat, you might be tempted to think that some people are weeds and some are wheat. Jesus' refusal to outright identify people and persons should give us pause. The evil of which Jesus speaks is systemic, structural, nearly universal. It's in the stumbling blocks, the commercialism, the racism, the sexism, that infects the way we live and, finally, each human soul. It's the evils within the human soul, the laziness, the arrogance, the cowardice.

People of different faiths, politics, or ideologies would love to imagine this text as lending support to the idea that God was coming for you, coming for foreigners, Muslims, liberals, conservatives, but not me. Jesus' response is: "No, God has come for everyone, and especially the Church." Sin exists; it's just not the sins that so many have you worried about. All of creation groans for redemption, Paul tells us.

In the consuming fire of God's mercy and justice, God will reconcile all things to himself, even our vices. God can use anger, burn it, refine it into conviction. God can use arrogance, burn it, refine it into the confidence necessary to challenge the powers-that-be. God can even use laziness. Lazy people, it turns out, tend to be very efficient. The

fire has come; God “from his field shall in that day all offenses purge away.” As our hymn reminds us, “Gather thou thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin; there, forever purified, in thy presence to abide.”

**A new black-and-white world.** Just because God allows wheat to grow together with weed doesn't mean that a black-and-white world doesn't exist. It simply means we must be vigilant in removing the plank from our own eye before criticizing the splinter in others. It means we must refrain from judgment. It means we must ask God, as we do in our collect, to “have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask.” It means we must trust in God and one another, speaking earnest truth in boldness and love.

We as Episcopalians, as Anglicans, as Christians, must walk a fine line between the twin evils of self-righteousness and faithlessness, between “it must be this way” and “it doesn't matter.”

We are so tired of being beaten about the head about gender and homosexuality that we might be tempted to say, “God doesn't care who you sleep with.”

We are so livid at an exploitative prosperity Gospel that we might be tempted to say, “God doesn't care about money.”

We are so sick of an absurd fastidiousness when it comes to worship that we might be tempted to say, “God doesn't care what you sing.”

Except that it does matter. God cares that you find your way to loving, respectful relationships. God cares about how God-given resources are used and shared or not. God cares deeply that the words you sing not only resonate with you but glorify God. And we ought to care about those things, too.

And so we ought to welcome fire, fire that remakes the world and us with it.

Make no mistake. God is coming, indeed God has come, to set broken people right, and we are all broken. Justice is coming; justice is here. Mercy is coming. Mercy is here. That which yearns for transformation will know healing and reconciliation. Jesus reassures the people, reassures us, that all that we have read from the prophets has come true: Jesus has come and will answer our prayer. And he will answer in fire.

Blessed is this God, the God who answers in fire.