

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 14, 2022

First Reading: Jeremiah 23:23-29

²³Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? ²⁴Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD. ²⁵I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, “I have dreamed, I have dreamed!” ²⁶How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? ²⁷They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. ²⁸Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. ²⁹Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Gospel: Luke 12:49-56

[Jesus said:] ⁴⁹“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵²From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³they 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.”

⁵⁴He 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. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

What a difference a couple or few weeks can make.

**And to stretch that a bit further, what a difference about
20 years, give or take one or two, can make.**

It was about that long ago ... (am I talking about the weeks or the years? Yes.) About that long ago that a couple or few different things helped bring about this sermon today.

In the shorter term, I planned ahead a little bit. Not entirely but a little bit. Near the end of June I mapped out what hymns I wanted to choose and what lectionary texts I wanted to focus on from the pulpit through the end of August. I bet that sounds like, well, duh, to some of you. Those of you are what are called “organized” and “planners.” To use the gentle term for it, long-term and planning and long-term projects are what can be deemed “growing edges” for me in ministry. So this was kind of a big step for me to take.

More organically, without planning it, several weeks ago, I started feeling some inspiration to utilize different images as visual aids on the cover of our Sunday bulletins. You know, the “jelly bean” image as I like to call it of the

galaxies captured by the James Webb Space Telescope, the snowy country church, the stained glass at Good Samaritan Chapel at the hospital in Phoenix. I kind of had some fun with it while at the same time, the concern arose in my mind that if I keep this up, I'm creating more work for myself every week and the ideas for focus images aren't always going to come so easily.

So I took a look at today's lectionary texts, particularly trying to center in on Jeremiah because that's what I said I was going to preach on back in June, and before I left for Kaua'i, I told Crissy what I wanted to use for today. And I did it with a bit of hesitation because it's precisely the kind of image and slogan that turns people off to the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, I'm afraid.

If you are at home and don't have a copy of today's bulletin in front of you, on the front is this snapshot of a little rubber patch like you might see on a jacket or a backpack

and there's a rather stern-looking long-dark-haired bearded man with a halo around his head and the slogan around him: "Jesus is coming ... and he's pissed."

Now some of us can laugh at this and some of us can be offended, whether by the theology represented or the language or maybe a little of both. But it's what my gut reaction was to the Scripture before us today and I decided to go ahead with it and let the chips fall where they may.

If you'll come much further back in time with me, my mother-in-law-to-be, in the very early 2000s, had a little cut-out slogan on the edge of her desktop computer monitor in her home office, not a flat screen like we usually have now but one of those big, heavy, awkward tube ones. And the note said: "Don't tell me how rocky the sea is – Just bring in the ship!" She and I only discussed it very briefly one time that I can recall, but the idea, right ... is don't whine, don't make excuses, just get the job done and be effective. We

don't need all the back story, just get to the point, and let's keep moving. She didn't say specifically but I bet this little motivational Post-It or whatever it was helped her get her monthly column for The South Whidbey Record submitted before deadline.

Now if you're still with me at this point, I think we can all agree that whether I tried to take this advice to heart or not – and I really did for a while – it ain't me. We're probably about 650 words into this sermon and I'm still just setting this thing up. I *want* to tell you how the sausage is made and feed it to you anyway. Sorry but I'm not sorry.

If planning and organization are a growing edge for me in ministry, vulnerability is a strength, or a weakness or a strength-in-weakness, however you want to frame that. If you want to know where I stand, you darn near always will. If you don't want to know where I stand, eventually you probably will. Again, sorry, not sorry.

But I do need some time to come out of my shell and to reveal more of who I am and how I relate to God in Christ and what I believe he is calling us to dive into together.

Sometimes, I know I'm overly cautious. And sometimes I choose the wrong times to throw caution to the wind and jump into some thing or other.

What a difference a year makes.

The associate to the bishop, Pastor Rebecca Shjerven, installed me here almost precisely a year ago as the called Minister of Word and Sacrament for Grace Lutheran Church in Port Townsend. I loved that then and I still love that now. That's not the big difference I'm talking about in this past year, thank God.

God has revealed more of who we are as a community at Grace and in Port Townsend this past year. I feel a lot more comfortable saying that as "we," including "*me*," now, than I did when I first grabbed the ropes here. That's all very

logical, yeah? We enter many human relationships hoping for the best but still uncertain exactly where the future is going to take us. There's still a lot to be revealed in the years to come and it's exciting and it's also scary and it's also, well, we just don't know what all it will be yet.

But I look back on this year and also these last couple weeks when I was away from Grace and Port Townsend for longer than just a few days for the first time since I got here, and I see, what I hope is the laying of a good foundation and possibility for new life to flourish in and among us.

A little more than a week before I left, I got up here and I preached a sermon that in no uncertain terms defended our LGBT+ siblings and same-sex marriage. And speaking of vulnerability, I wondered how that was gonna land. Based on the feedback I've received since then, so far, so good. But that's all fine and dandy in the abstract, yeah?

I notice, as I've said, a few weeks can make some significant difference and I notice that while I was away, Port Townsend became the latest epicenter for national debate on transgender issues. I didn't see that coming. And I'm not entirely done processing what I missed. I read some posts on social media, the articles in the Daily News, the Free Press and the Leader about the recent incident and fallout from it at the YMCA just over kitty-corner from our church building here at Grace.

These kinds of things, they might be easier to avoid for as long as we can. But as God said to Jeremiah, who can hide? It's a matter of when, not if, the most divisive issues of our day reach us and reach our lives personally. If we do not act in response, that is in itself, inherently, an act and a response.

Which leads us back to our image of Jesus. I know this Jesus but I don't know this Jesus. Let me explain. If I had a

nickel for every time I have heard someone tell me they avoid church so that they don't catch fire or brimstone or lightning smite or some variant on that phrasing when they enter ... well, I probably wouldn't even have a crisp Alexander Hamilton in my pocket but that still adds up to A LOT of times. And I'll often laugh and play along but it really does sadden me. This judgmental, none-too-easily-appeased white male authority figure is all the Jesus millions of people have ever known. And I don't blame folks if they want to avoid that guy.

But that's not Jesus of Nazareth, God's anointed one, as I have come to know him. Yet we have this clearly pretty angry Jesus in Luke's Gospel for today. He says it himself that he is coming to bring fire. Am I wrong to believe Jesus isn't set to smite so that he can make things right?

Maybe I am. But I don't think so. I do believe Jesus is coming. And I do believe he is pissed about some stuff we

have been up to in our lives and in our lives together as a community and a society and that he has every right to be. He should be.

But I also believe Jesus can come and Jesus can be pissed at us and Jesus can still be passionately in love with us all at the same time. To quote King Missile's song, Jesus was way cool ... anything he wanted to do, he did. Jesus is the living embodiment of the prophecy of Jeremiah, fulfilled beyond anyone's wildest dream, of God near by, truly with us, and not far off.

And Jesus is God and God is inherently divisive, I'm afraid. Jesus is just being real with us here today. Jeremiah was just being real with us in his day. Dreams and ideas that have nothing to do with God are going to get gift-wrapped in God-language today, tomorrow and the next day just as they did yesterday, the day before and 3,000 years ago.

But in Jeremiah, God says, so be it. I won't shut their mouths. God, sometimes, I wish would, but doesn't. God's truth will still be known. God's Word will be spoken faithfully. I hope I can do that. I really do. That God can use me to speak a Word of truth despite my own sin, my shortcomings, my biases, my blind spots, my stubbornness, my arrogance.

I don't know what exactly what happened in the locker room at the YMCA on July 26. I have my suspicions, colored by some of what I have learned about LGBT+ issues from research and from people I know and love and respect. But I do not believe any of us who were not there can ever know precisely what went down. I do know Clementine Adams and Julie Jaman are both children of God. Though I have not met either of them, each of them are our neighbors here in this community and each one of them was and is afraid in the aftermath of this and all the attention neither probably imagined would come to this. I expect some of us at Grace

do know one or both parties. I know there are no perfect solutions that make everyone happy with something like this. For some, Clementine is and always will be a biological male. For others, she and people like her are fully accepted for who they have let the world know they are.

As I said three weeks ago, I am not, and I cannot authentically be, neutral in such matters. It is my plan and my intention to be at the city council meeting tomorrow evening and support the proposed resolution to declare this city a welcome place for transgender people, in a clerical collar as a pastor and not just a private citizen. But I also know that there are things I do not know, dynamics I have not been present in this community long enough to know and I want to keep my eyes, my ears, my heart and my mind open to different perspectives. I want to pray that even those with whom I disagree, and whose positions in that disagreement I am afraid bring harm to others, are not themselves harmed,

that they can feel heard and not attacked and that a single issue will not prevent people in this community from having genuine care for one another and human empathy for one another.

I have been saying this since before I became ordained into ministry in the ELCA but I want to maintain an open door and make genuine space for disagreement, for dialogue with me and with others in this church. I think at times I have been a bit naïve about the power difference inherent in what is said from the pulpit and how that conversation can realistically continue. I don't claim to be perfect or even necessarily all that good about my approach to conflict and controversy. But I do want to invite these things and the challenges they bring with them in hope and in faith that if we can handle these things in Christian love and humility, we can end up in a *better* place for it, not a worse one.

I hope we can dialogue, in some ways, as I did with one of my oldest friends, who I've known for 32 years, who describes herself as an atheist but who has also told me in the past of how she prayed for her child when they were born with serious complications and in need of major surgeries in the months afterward. I don't expect her to ever come to faith that looks much at all like my own or join a church or anything like that. We sat in the courtyard at Penn Cove Brewery in downtown Coupeville yesterday afternoon and I told her about what had happened at the Mountain View Y and how these kind of issues keep coming up and how they divide in a church that proclaims a faith that also centers on an important value of unity. And how hard it is to preach anything resembling unity and how it just keeps getting harder and harder. And I am grateful that our conversation and conversations like it in the years past, even if they haven't led her into faith, have led her into respect for faith when faith is respect-FULL to all human beings.

This is the faith I seek to live with you and among you, friends of Grace. Like many of my colleagues, I come to stand before you Sunday mornings, sometimes with a message, with a Word that I'll nervously only half-jokingly say beforehand, "I hope this isn't the one that gets me fired," or that I will have sweated over wondering, "for whom is this the last straw that causes them to leave? And to increase the anxiety those who remain already have about the decline of the church they love?" Ultimately, I can have some influence in these regards but I cannot, and should not, have the power to ultimately make such intimate decisions for any one of you. But I invite you, if you have heard me, to let me listen to you as well. And to hear that I can disagree with you about some things and pretty strongly at that, and still love you. I can and I will still show up for you when you need me to. I can and I will respect you and not forget that I can be wrong, and I can and I will sin against you and forget that some time

and need your grace and forgiveness, as you and I have each first received these things from God.

I will, as I responded to Pastor Rebecca and as I responded to you about a year ago, and I ask God to help me.

Amen.