

The Second Sunday in Martyrs' Tide, August 17, AD 2025

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

Fire, Hammer, and Cross

Jeremiah 23:16–29

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

“AM I A GOD AT HAND, DECLARES THE LORD, AND NOT A GOD FAR AWAY? CAN A MAN HIDE HIMSELF IN SECRET PLACES SO THAT I CANNOT SEE HIM? DECLARES THE LORD. DO I NOT FILL HEAVEN AND EARTH? DECLARES THE LORD. I HAVE HEARD WHAT THE PROPHETS HAVE SAID WHO PROPHECY LIES IN MY NAME, SAYING, ‘I HAVE DREAMED, I HAVE DREAMED!’ HOW LONG SHALL THERE BE LIES IN THE HEART OF THE PROPHETS WHO PROPHECY LIES, AND WHO PROPHECY THE DECEIT OF THEIR OWN HEART, WHO THINK TO MAKE MY PEOPLE FORGET MY NAME BY THEIR DREAMS THAT THEY TELL ONE ANOTHER, EVEN AS THEIR FATHERS FORGOT MY NAME FOR BAAL? LET THE PROPHET WHO HAS A DREAM TELL THE DREAM, BUT LET HIM WHO HAS MY WORD SPEAK MY WORD FAITHFULLY. WHAT HAS STRAW IN COMMON WITH WHEAT? DECLARES THE LORD. IS NOT MY WORD LIKE FIRE, DECLARES THE LORD, AND LIKE A HAMMER THAT BREAKS THE ROCK IN PIECES? (vv 23–29)

Allow me to set the stage for a minute: The year is 600 BC. The place is the land of Judea. In world affairs, large powers threaten to swallow small nations, corruption stains both religious and political rulers, the poor suffer and the rich prosper in an economy on the brink, and as for God’s people? “MY PEOPLE HAVE COMMITTED TWO EVILS,” declares the LORD: “THEY HAVE FORSAKEN ME, THE FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATERS, AND THEY HAVE HEWED OUT CISTERNS FOR THEMSELVES, BROKEN CISTERNS THAT CAN HOLD NO WATER” (Jer 2:13).

They’ve been looking for life in all the wrong places.

MY PEOPLE . . . HAVE FORSAKEN ME, THE FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATERS.

The diagnosis is bleak: spiritual dehydration.

THEY’VE HEWED OUT . . . BROKEN CISTERNS THAT CAN HOLD NO WATER.

Their home remedies have only made it worse.

MY PEOPLE . . . HAVE FORSAKEN ME.

If it goes untreated much longer, it'll prove fatal.

THEY'VE HEWED OUT . . . BROKEN CISTERNS.

Welcome to the days of Jeremiah the prophet.

In those days, they said, "IT SHALL BE WELL WITH YOU" (v 17).

In those days, they said, "NO DISASTER SHALL COME UPON YOU" (v. 17).

"PEACE, PEACE" (Jer 6:14 // 8:11), was what they proclaimed.

Even to THOSE WHO DESPISE THE WORD OF THE LORD,

even to the ONE WHO STUBBORNLY FOLLOWS HIS OWN HEART (v 17).

"Peace" and "well-being" is what the people wanted to hear.

Why? Because they had ITCHING EARS (2 Tim 4:3).

Itching ears not a rash or an infection,

though it probably is contagious.

It's a dangerous spiritual condition,

and the people of Judea had it.

"FOR THE TIME IS COMING," St. Paul wrote to Timothy, "WHEN PEOPLE WILL NOT ENDURE SOUND TEACHING, BUT HAVING ITCHING EARS THEY WILL ACCUMULATE FOR THEMSELVES TEACHERS TO SUIT THEIR OWN PASSIONS, AND THEY'LL TURN AWAY FROM LISTENING TO THE TRUTH AND WANDER OFF INTO MYTHS" (2 Tim 4:3–4).

It wouldn't be the first time.

It had already happened in the days of Jeremiah.

And we should be ready for it to happen in our own days as well.

The language St. Paul uses is interesting: THEY WILL ACCUMULATE FOR THEMSELVES TEACHERS. Not just *one* teacher here or there, but a lot of them, teaching what their itching ears want to hear.

In this setting and context, here's what the prophet Jeremiah proclaims: THUS SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS: "DON'T LISTEN TO THE WORDS OF THE PROPHETS WHO PROPHECY TO YOU, FILLING YOU WITH VAIN HOPES. THEY SPEAK VISIONS OF THEIR OWN MINDS, NOT FROM THE MOUTH OF THE LORD. THEY SAY CONTINUALLY TO THOSE WHO DESPISE THE WORD OF THE LORD, 'IT SHALL BE WELL WITH YOU'; AND TO EVERYONE WHO STUBBORNLY FOLLOWS HIS OWN HEART, THEY SAY, 'NO DISASTER SHALL COME UPON YOU'" (vv 16–17).

To the people of that day, and to us as well, the question is:
Which word will they believe?
Will they believe that they're fine and everything is good and there's no danger of
disaster and no one needs to repent?
Or will they believe the guy who told them they better get ready because Babylon is
coming and there'll be seventy years of exile so repent right now?
I know which one I'd rather believe.
Of course they'd rather believe that everything's fine.
It'll all wash over.
No problems.
No dangers.
And don't worry about repentance.

Now I'm not saying that Babylon is coming.
And I'm not saying that there'll be seventy years of exile.
I'm not Jeremiah.
What I'm saying is that the conditions are similar:
We live among people WHO DESPISE THE WORD OF THE LORD
and think that everything will be okay.
We're taught by culture and society to STUBBORNLY FOLLOW our own hearts
and make peace with sin.
We don't want to be told that there's anything wrong with us
or with how we're living
or with what we're doing
or with where we're headed.

So it sounds good when we're told: "IT SHALL BE WELL WITH YOU" (v 17)
and "NO DISASTER SHALL COME UPON YOU" (v. 17)
and "PEACE, PEACE" (Jer 6:14 // 8:11).
It sounds great.

The problem is that it wasn't true in Jeremiah's day.
Those were lies.
They were made up, deceptive visions, false dreams.
They didn't come from the Lord.
They were the thoughts, the ideas, and the fiction of lying prophets
who kept saying "It's all gonna be okay," even though it wasn't.
It was two spoonfuls of sugar *and* no medicine.

I know we want to hear that everything going great
and everything's gonna be fine
and there's no danger out there.
But it isn't true. It simply isn't true.

It can be hard to hear these strong words of God.
It can be hard to hear His Word coming like a fire and a hammer.
But sometimes that's what we need to hear.

The Lord has words for those false prophets.
Basically, He says: "Shut up. Stop telling lies."
There are so many lies out there.
We're too eager to hear them,
too eager to latch on to the next thing, the greatest thing,
any word that will make us feel better,
even if it's *not* the Word of the Lord.

The question is this:
Those who say these things, have they been listening to Him?
Do they have any idea what He's up to?
Do they have His Word?
Because *if* they don't, then we just need to turn it off and forget about them.

The last thing we need is prophets like that—prophets to make us feel good.
What we need is the truth, even if it hurts.
We need strong medicine.

We may not want to think about the God that Jeremiah proclaims.
Because Jeremiah proclaims a God who's not a tame God.
He can't be kept in a cage or contained in an aquarium.
There's that strange statement from God:
"AM I A GOD AT HAND, DECLARES THE LORD, AND NOT A GOD FAR AWAY?"
He means: "Do you think that you can keep me right here and contained,
like a pet or a toy—keep who I am and what I have to say under your control?"
Our God is strong and fierce, fire and hammer . . . like love often is.

What kind of love is it to let disaster overtake someone unannounced?
What kind of love is it to leave someone in their sin?
What kind of love is it to watch someone careening over a cliff
and just pat them on the back and tell them that it'll all be okay?

If you ask God, that's a sick kind of love.
He has real love, deep fierce, fire and hammer love for you and for me.
But it is a love with zero tolerance for sin.
When we sin, when we go astray, when we listen to a false voice,
 He doesn't say, "Oh, it'll be okay."
He has zero tolerance for those who lead people away from Him and into sin.

"IS NOT MY WORD LIKE FIRE, DECLARES THE LORD,
 AND LIKE A HAMMER THAT BREAKS THE ROCK IN PIECES?" (v 29).

Fire and hammer.
Dangerous tools, but sometimes they're needed to get the job done.
Sometimes you need a fire,
 and sometimes you need a hammer.
"This is God's thunderbolt.
By the Law He strikes down both obvious sinners and false saints.
He declares no one to be in the right." (*Smalcald Articles*)

So where is it in your life today that you need His fire to burn and His hammer to fall?
Where is the sin in your life
 that needs to be consumed by His purifying and be smashed to pieces
 like a broken rock?

I want to be clear:
When God speaks of His Word like a fire and a hammer,
 His Word is *not* out to destroy you.
But it is out to destroy your sin and death and the devil.
It's meant to purify and crush our sin.

So let our ears be open to hear His Word.
And lay your heart bare, hiding nothing from Him,
 because He sees it all anyway.
Bring it Him and say,
 "Lord, bring the fire and bring the hammer, because that's what I need.
 I need Your Law to crush what is not true and not right and not good,
 everything that is unholy and impure in my life.
Don't just tell me that it's gonna be okay.
Set me free from the bondage to sin, death, and the devil."

Now fast forward six hundred years from the days of Jeremiah,
but still in the land of Judea,
where a man says:

“I CAME TO CAST FIRE ON THE EARTH, AND WOULD THAT IT WERE ALREADY
KINDLED! I HAVE A BAPTISM TO BE BAPTIZED WITH, AND HOW GREAT IS MY
DISTRESS UNTIL IT IS ACCOMPLISHED!” (Luke 12:49–50)

When He told His disciples that the days were coming
when He would be handed over to the Gentiles and suffer and be crucified,
one of His disciples said,
“Of course not, Lord.
It will be well with You.
No disaster will befall You.
Peace, peace!”

And He said, “I didn’t come to make that kind of peace.
I came to make war.
To bring the fire and the hammer against sin.”
He was longing and desiring for that fire to be kindled
and to undergo the baptism that He came to be baptized with.

What’s Jesus talking about? He’s speaking about His own cross.
He’s speaking about the fire of God’s wrath consuming Him.
He’s speaking about the hammer of judgment
putting the spikes into His wrists and His feet.

Jesus didn’t come to tell us that everything would be okay
in our sin or with death or with Satan and with hell.
He came to make everything right through His own suffering, death, and resurrection.

The fire and the hammer aren’t enough.
Along with the fire and the hammer, we need the cross.
That’s where our sin has been crucified with Christ.
That’s where God’s fire consumed all that is wrong with us.
That’s where the hammer fell to break our fallen natures.

Jesus was baptized into *that*,
so we could be baptized into His salvation,
like little Tucker was this morning.

Not baptized into “Everything-will-be-well”
and “Peace, peace,” where there is no peace
but baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection.

That is what we need.

Recently I’ve been reading through some of Martin Luther’s *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*.
I’ve been struck what he writes

to the people who are sick or dying or bereaved or despairing.
He never writes saying, “Oh, it’s all gonna be okay.”
He writes knowing the reality
of death and suffering and illness and depression and anxiety.
But He says, “There’s a Man who suffered and died to be with you in these things.”

“AM I A GOD AT HAND, DECLARES THE LORD, AND NOT A GOD FAR AWAY?”

The answer is that He’s both.

Because the God who was far off has come near to us in Jesus Christ.

We don’t just need a band aid.

We don’t need someone to say that it’s all gonna be fine.

We need Him and all that He has done.

We need Jesus Christ, the forgiveness, life, and salvation that He brings.

We’re calling this season of the Church Year Martyrs’ Tide.

We remember the martyrs of the Church,

those who died for confessing Christ.

There were those who told the martyrs,

“No disaster will befall you . . . if you turn away from Christ.”

“Peace, peace, if you simply do what we tell you.”

And the faithful martyrs who went before us said,

“We will not have peace at that price.

We will have peace only through the blood of Christ.”

And they were willing to lay down their lives and to sacrifice themselves
to the fire and to the hammer,

knowing that One had gone before them

who made a way through death to the life of the world to come.

CONSIDER our Lord WHO ENDURED FROM SINNERS SUCH HOSTILITY AGAINST
HIMSELF, SO THAT YOU MAY NOT GROW WEARY OR FAINTHEARTED (Heb
12:3).

There is peace and hope, and it is the peace and hope found
in Jesus Christ crucified, risen, reigning and come again soon.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ
Jesus.

Phil 4:7