

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Fire in the Bones

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Grace to you and peace from the One who calls us, the One who baptizes us into new life, and the One who holds us when we tremble: Jesus Christ. Amen.

“...and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” (Jer. 20:9) This line names something many of us know in our own bodies: the exhaustion of speaking out and the even deeper exhaustion of not speaking up. The way silence can begin to feel like complicity, and a closed mouth can still burn.

Jeremiah is not romanticizing this. The fire isn't a joyful religious feeling; it's a costly compulsion, a truth that won't stay contained, love that won't stay polite, God's insistence that the world doesn't get to call cruelty “normal.”

That's the focus today: this holy fire. Because we live in a world that uses fear, isolation, and intimidation to suppress truth. Yet Jesus calls us to a bold, prophetic faith that confronts the powers of this world while trusting in God's unconditional love.

In Matthew 10, Jesus sends out his disciples, warning them they will face misunderstanding, slander, and opposition. “A disciple is not above their teacher... If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!” (Matt. 10:24–25)

In other words, if you follow the Way of Jesus, don't be surprised when the world that crucified him tries to silence you too. Empires thrive on keeping people afraid and quiet. Empire needs the public to believe two things:

1. that violence is necessary, and
2. that resistance is futile.

Jesus repeats three times in this passage, in different ways, like someone pressing a steady hand to a trembling shoulder, “Do not be afraid” (Matt. 10:26, 28, 31). Not

because there's nothing to fear, but because fear sustains empire's deadly machinery.

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). Jesus doesn't deny the body can be harmed, but he clarifies the limits of coercive power. Empire can terrorize bodies, yes. It can threaten livelihoods, reputations, and stability, yes. But it cannot possess the soul or own the truth. It cannot reach where God holds your life.

Headlines reveal how fear is manufactured and terror staged as a public sermon preached by the powerful. The empire acts like a roaring lion when ICE agents abduct and deport people, and 19-year-olds like Merwil Gutiérrez are sent to “super prisons' as if human beings are parcels to be shipped. We see the crushing machinery of political violence in the starvation of civilians in Gaza, in airstrikes in Ukraine, in the neglected chaos in Sudan. We see the state manufacturing scapegoats through relentless anti-trans laws, turning vulnerable minorities into 'problems' to be solved, because dividing the public is always easier than doing justice.

And the purpose of all of it, the spectacle, cruelty, and endless churn, is not just to hurt the targeted. It is also to send a message to everyone watching: Keep quiet, look away, don't ask questions, don't help, and stay uninvolved. Empire wants us to believe that compassion is a crime and solidarity is dangerous. That somehow, speaking the truth will only make things worse. And into that world, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid."

Then Jesus offers a strange, tender image, one that isn't sentimental when understood clearly: “Even the hairs of your head are all counted” (Matt. 10:30). This isn't God's way of reassuring us that nothing bad will occur. Instead, it signifies that you are not disposable, God cares for every detail of your life.

Empire treats humans as expendable, labeling them "collateral damage." It views children, refugees, trans teens, families, and detainees as statistics, threats, or necessary losses. But Jesus says not one sparrow falls to the ground “apart from your Father” (Matt. 10:29), and even the hairs of your head are counted. Both of which are simply different ways of saying that God's attention isn't abstract. God's love and care aren't based on usefulness, citizenship, or respectability.

To God, there is no such thing as collateral damage, only beloved children. Once you see another human as fully human, it becomes impossible to accept their suffering as normal. That's why Jeremiah burns and why the psalmist cries out in Psalm 69, "It is for your sake that I have borne reproach... I have become a stranger to my kindred" (Ps. 69:7–8). The psalmist isn't persecuted for cruelty but rather for refusing to accept injustice or pretend it's okay.

Which brings us to an important truth for the church: grief isn't weakness or failure of faith but love refusing to pretend. It's a holy disruption that keeps hearts human in an inhumane world. The world will try to shame you for feeling too much grief and naming it. "You're overreacting," "You're being too political," "You always make it about race," "Stop talking about gender," "You're being divisive."

But grief, real grief, means your soul is alive and you have not let the machinery of empire wear down your empathy. It shows you're still capable of being moved by what moves the heart of God. And we cannot hold that fire in, not if the Spirit of God is in us. Jesus says, "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops" (Matt. 10:27). That's the work of the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, who won't let the world's lies be the last word.

The Spirit empowers the disinherited and marginalized, those the world has told to be quiet, and the Spirit also troubles those of us who have had the option to stay safe. The Spirit makes us courage, not by making us fearless, but by making truth and love stronger than our fear.

Romans 6 comes alongside all of this, like a deep theological current underneath the prophetic fire. Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3). Baptism signifies a transfer of allegiance, ending one life and beginning another. "We have been buried with him by baptism into death... so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). This means the empire cannot define reality, possibility, or identity.

In baptism, we die to the false, ego-driven life based on self-protection, respectability, and fear. We die to the life that says, "As long as my people are okay, I'm fine," We die to the life that needs someone else to be beneath us in order for us to feel secure. And then we rise into Christ's life; a life of fearless belonging

where love is not a private feeling but a public commitment. This frees us to serve our neighbors because our life is “hidden with Christ in God,” enabling Jesus’ words: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39).

Once again, I want to be clear that Jesus is not glorifying suffering, nor is Jesus commanding self-destruction. Instead, he reveals the paradox of liberation: building your life on fear and self-preservation keeps you enslaved. But entrusting your life to God's love leads to an abundant and everlasting life.

What do we do with this fire in our bones? We can't just lament; we must let the fire out through concrete acts of with-ness. To lose our false lives for the gospel, we must work together for mutual survival, because love is not proven by intensity of feeling, but by willingness to show up.

So let me offer three practices:

1) Courageously interrupt hate. Refuse to normalize cruelty. In your workplace, with family, friends, or any other community, challenge racist, Islamophobic, anti-immigrant, misogynistic, or transphobic jokes and rhetoric. Do so with clarity. Short, faithful sentences like “I don’t find that funny,” “That’s not true,” “That harms people,” or “We’re not doing that here” can be effective.

Empire depends on social permission. It depends on everyone laughing along and keeping the peace. But Jesus doesn't call us to “keeping the peace” when it's bought through dehumanizing others.

2) Practice radical solidarity by turning concern into action: make calls, write letters, attend meetings, oppose unjust bills, support impacted groups, stand with those scrutinized, and learn to accompany targeted individuals at court, hospitals, or schools; show up at protests, detention centers, and in daily survival. Solidarity is not saviorism or speaking for others but standing with them, refusing to let the powerful isolate anyone.

3) Build alternative networks of care. Divest from the empire’s economy of scarcity by organizing mutual aid. Share meals, pool resources, form care teams, offer rides, create emergency funds, stock the pantries, and learn neighbors' needs. Practice the old church word for this: *koinonia*, a fellowship so real it becomes material.

Because community is how God unbinds us from the systems of death. Community is how we remember we're not alone. Community is how the fire becomes warmth and light, not just private rage. If you think you're not brave enough, that's where the gospel wants to meet you. Because the final word isn't "Try harder." The final word is not "Be brave." The final word is God's love. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." Why? Because God is not a distant judge but Emmanuel, God-with-us, who joins human suffering. God's power is fiercely protective, like a mother hen gathering her chicks, not coercive. This is why we can be bold. Not because we are tough, but because we are held.

Jeremiah ends with a stubborn song: "Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers" (Jer. 20:13). The deliverance is not always visible. The psalmist is still in the pit. The disciples face danger. Baptism leads us into conflict with death-dealing systems. Yet...God is faithful. Hear the benediction embedded in the text: You are completely known. You are unconditionally loved. You do not walk this Way alone. And you have nothing to lose, for you already possess the ultimate treasure, your life belongs to God.

So go with your head held high. Let the fire of justice and compassion burn brightly in your bones; not as a consuming blaze that destroys you, but as a holy flame that keeps you human, keeps you tender, keeps you truthful, keeps you free. Amen.