

The Tongue, the Fire, and the Wheel of Genesis

Jeremiah 17:5-13; James 3:1-12

There are sixty six books in our Bibles, each one its own sort of message and literature, each one composed by a human author whose own heart and mind was inspired by God to write words that speak from the heart of God to our hearts and minds, and each book was written to address the swirling circumstances and relationships that confronted each human author where he or she lived.

And of course, there were not sixty six different human authors. Moses, fourteen hundred years before Christ, wrote five books. Paul, in the decades after Jesus died and rose, wrote twelve letters to Christians all around the Mediterranean rim. James, Jesus own half brother, wrote just one letter. So all these books, even though they are all inspired by the Holy Spirit, all true, all given both to bind and to free us today, even though they are all the word of God, they are all different. Each book, each letter expresses something of the wiring and personality of each author, and something of the challenges God's people faced as each book was written.

By which I mean to say that we can't expect every one of all these authors to be the life of the party! Jesus, looking at wildflowers in the hills of Galilee, which are, he said, "*...here today and gone tomorrow...*", but in those few days that wildflowers bloom in the desert, Jesus saw the grandeur and glory of a royal court. He said, "*Even Solomon in all his splendor was not dressed like one of these...*".

But his own brother James, looking over the same colors sounded an entirely different note. James said, "*The sun rises with scorching heat and withers the grass and its flower falls off, and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed.*" So James and Jesus both saw the same colors, but each man was inspired by God's Spirit to draw an entirely different principle from what he saw.

And the temptation for us is to listen to Jesus singing the wonder of wildflowers, and to put aside James with his dreary reminder that, in this life, colors are a momentary treat, but wilting is certain and we need to be ready for it. And so this morning I've built our service around two authors from the Bible that God's people have been tempted to set aside as grouches, Jeremiah in our Call to Worship and James in the Scripture Lesson I've just read to you.

And part of the reason I've done that is that in this morning's passage, James starts out acting the grouch with people like me. He writes, "*Let not many of you become teachers, since you know that we teachers come in for a harder judgment. For we all fail in many ways, but if a man does not fail in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body as well.*" Tough words for me to read because I teach, I talk for a living. And I know from hard experience how often it

is that the urgency I feel to put God's word across has sometimes led me to shade it in some way that bends or dilutes the purity and beauty of what God actually said in his Word.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs, *"In a multitude of words, there is sure transgression, but he who restrains his lips is wise."* And Jeremiah outlined in our Call to Worship precisely why talking can be so dangerous. Teaching is a dangerous profession, talking is a dicey business because the things we say to each other flow through our hearts, and our hearts are far more bent and broken by the Fall than most of us imagine. So Jeremiah warns us, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"* And the answer the prophet expects is "Not us!"

We don't begin to understand what's going on in our hearts. Solomon put it this way, he said, *"All a man's ways are right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs motives."* In other words, it's only natural for fallen people to tell ourselves stories, to twist right and wrong in our own hearts so that what we want, what we do looks and feels right. And this tendency to narrate our own lives in our own favor flies in the face of the fact that the whole point of giving our lives to Christ, being *"born again"* as Jesus put it, is to start life over, this time letting God narrate, learning from God what's right and wrong over and against what's always worked for us.

And this propensity to tell myself stories, to justify myself is particularly dangerous when a teacher tries to handle the word of God. In Mark's gospel, Jesus caught old Israel's rabbi's shading what Moses taught to make it tame, more external, less personal than Moses ever meant it to be. To hear the Pharisees, you might think that the secret to life was washing your hands, eating the right food, mastering the rituals to a point where faith in God was more about propriety and appearances and less a matter of the heart. The rabbi's actually encouraged extravagant gifts to synagogue to the point where believers left their own elderly parents in poverty.

So they kept the rituals as patterns of life, but often failed to learn the art of love, the heart lessons the rituals were given to teach. So Jesus brought them up short, he said, *...whatever goes into a person from the outside does not defile him, since it enters his... stomach...not his heart. What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of a man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and they are what defile a person."*

So what concerns James in our passage this morning is the possibility that a teacher, a person like me, might shade some passage of Scripture, some aspect of God's truth away from the beauty and purity that lives in God's heart toward some selfish proclivity that lives in my own heart.

Because there is no such thing as sacred teaching that doesn't pass through the heart of the teacher. And what we say matters more than we're inclined to think, what we teach and learn in church is more important than we imagine, because it is what we think about God, what we take to heart from God's word that defines us as people and sets the trajectory for our lives. So here's a notion for you mull over: When a love relationship fails, the cause is usually doctrine.

Doctrine is what we think about life. So to the extent that what we take to heart and say is true is tainted by any of the evil that Jesus and Jeremiah both warned us about, to that extent that evil will roam in our lives and relationships, destroying the patterns God gave us to hold life together and make life make sense. James put it this way, he wrote, "*The tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the whole body, setting on fire the whole course of life...*".

That phrase "*the whole course of life*" is literally in the Greek "*the wheel of Genesis*" and what James wants us to remember is that moment when a spoken lie set the whole physical universe spinning in the wrong direction. Because we're told in the first chapter of Genesis that life was good, "*very good*", God told us. We, humanity, were made in his likeness, his image bearers in the physical universe.

So there was an order and a rhythm to life set by God and followed faithfully by the man and the woman God placed here in a protected sanctuary to learn the art of love and justice and honesty by which God wanted us, their descendants, to govern each other and the rest of the physical creation.

But just as we were setting up, just as we were sorting out the garden and the animals and each other, along came a demonic Serpent. Think how perfectly the image of a Serpent's mouth fits James' words here about the dangers of the tongue. The reptile's peculiar forked tongue, the potential of a venomous strike perfectly match James' words when he says, "*The tongue...is a world of iniquity...a restless evil, full of deadly poison...a fire...which is set aflame by hell*".

It was what the Serpent said, a skillful blend of half truths and outright lies that moved our ancestors to a place where turning from God seemed reasonable and even wise. "*Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'*" The woman sought to evangelize the demon in so many words, "No! No, God is good! We may eat of the fruit from the trees."

She went on, "There's just one tree in the midst of the garden whose fruit we shall not eat, or even touch or we will die." "Aha! I knew it!" said the Serpent. "That old skinflint of a God doesn't want you to be happy! You won't die, if you eat the fruit. You'll be free from his tyranny. You'll know good from evil for yourselves." The Serpent's first assertion was blatantly false, a wild, provocative exaggeration. But the Serpent's doctrine from the get-go, the

contagious evil in the Serpent's heart was the notion that God was not good, not generous, not honest, not to be trusted or obeyed.

And what the Serpent did was to create enough swirl where what the man and the woman should have known about God began to shimmer inside them and spin in the direction where the Serpent had already gone. There's a passage in Isaiah 14 where the old prophet calls the Babylonian king, Lucifer, and then remembers the Tower of Babel in such language that believers ever since have thought that Isaiah had Satan in mind. Because the point of the passage is that all sin is founded on the notion that we are good enough, smart enough, masterful enough to reach heaven ourselves, to make do without needing a God to love us and save us and lord it over us.

Isn't that the doctrine the Serpent preached to our ancestors, that life is about us? "Aren't we swell? Aren't we magnificent? Why should creatures so wonderfully made need a God to tell us how to live, what to do, what trees we can eat from, what trees we shouldn't touch? I have eyes! I have taste buds! I live in this garden, I work these plants. Why don't I get a vote about eating and touching and who should be boss?" My mother in law kept a little white stone on the table next to the door at her house. Engraved on the stone were the words "Conform and be dull."

Which was a laugh because my wife's family are Down Easters, they're all New England Yankees. They are the stubbornest, most independent people I've known. They don't conform and they're anything but dull. But Libby's little white stone leapt to mind because dullness, oppression, grayness and coldness is what leaps to mind when some guy like me takes to a pulpit and starts harping on obedience to the absolute, unchangeable, unbreakable commandments of God.

It only ever works if we can bend our minds back to believing that God loves us, knows what we need over and against what we want. We won't obey God until we can say from our hearts with Jesus, "*...the truth will set you free.*" It's become fashionable to think that all Jesus ever talked about was niceness and goodness and lilies of the field. But in fact he was worried about what teachers say every bit as much as his brother James. Listen to what he said in the Sermon on the Mount.

"Don't think that I've come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I've not come to abolish them but to fulfill them...Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven..." Or as James put it: "*Let not many of you become teachers since you know that we teachers come in for a harder judgment.*"

Because men and women like me are prone to begin telling our own stories if we're left to do our work by ourselves without other believers in the church who are also working through what

these passages really mean. The tendency for people like me is to drift into what I've always called Be-Like-Me preaching. And I've got a Yankee wife who will tell you that being like me is the last thing you want to do. This is one reason an exclusive diet of media teaching is no good. The checks and balances aren't there. You can't compare hearts with a guy on the radio.

The point of opening God's word and wrestling with it together is to bend our minds and open our hearts to loving and trusting and obeying God together so that no one heart shades what God said. There I've gone, so caught up in James' warnings for teachers that I've not handled what he's said about blessing and cursing. The truth is that there is a world of ways our tongue can lead us wrong. We can be cruel and nasty and harsh. We can flatter and manipulate and use people. But the place to start is the heart. Our tongues go wrong because our hearts are wrong.

Which is what Solomon taught in the Proverbs: *"Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."*