

15AUG10 Text: Jer. 23:29 ***“Is not My Word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?”***

What do fire, sledgehammer, sword and water have in common? **They can all can be instruments of *destruction*.** Fire consumes anything in its path as we have witnessed on the news with the recent wildfires again out West. A sledgehammer shatters concrete and rocks. A sword cuts and severs. Water floods and drowns as floods in our nation and around the world have again done.

What do fire, sledgehammer, sword and water have in common? **They can also be instruments of *construction*.** Fire purifies by refining away impurities. A hammer drives nails and builds. A surgeon’s sharp scalpel heals by cutting away diseased tissue. Water cleanses away dirt and gives refreshment to all who are thirsty.

Our Old Testament lesson today compares the Word of God to fire and a hammer. When we look elsewhere in Scripture, the Word of God is likened to the action of a sword and water. **This means that God’s Word works both *destructively* and *constructively*.** It destroys and it builds up! It cuts away and it heals! God’s Word of **Law kills**. God’s Word of **Gospel brings life**. The Law *shatters* stony, unrepentant hearts. The Gospel *builds* a living faith. The Word of God is

THE WORD THAT DIVIDES

To correctly understand the Word of God, THE WORD THAT DIVIDES, the Word of God itself must be rightly divided into both Law and Gospel, the **destructive** and **constructive** elements of God’s Word, so that the message of both sin and grace, judgment and promise, damnation and salvation are purely proclaimed. This morning, then, let us briefly consider THE WORD THAT DIVIDES, that Word which consumes and purifies, shatters and builds, cuts and heals, drowns and cleanses.

Our Old Testament lesson today is a small portion of the book of Jeremiah, a prophet who had the primary task of proclaiming a message of judgment upon the corrupt nation of Judah and its leaders but also speaking a message of promise for the faithful remnant of believers who still looked to the LORD. Because of faithfully proclaiming THE WORD THAT DIVIDES, Jeremiah himself was a very unpopular man! Many did not want to hear the message he proclaimed from God. For example, here in the 23rd chapter, God’s Word of Law proclaimed by Jeremiah acted like a consuming fire, burning away the false motives of the priests and

exposing the false prophets of Jeremiah's day. We read in verse 11: *"Both prophet and priest are godless; even in My temple I find their wickedness, declares the LORD."* **God used Jeremiah to renounce the self-serving priests, the lies and dreams of the false prophets and the delusions of self-appointed dreamers and visionaries.** The false prophets and misguided visionaries were telling the people that there was nothing to worry about and no need for repentance. Jeremiah on the other hand proclaimed, *'This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They keep saying to those who despise Me, 'The LORD says: You will have peace.' And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, 'No harm will come to you.' See, the storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked.'* (Jer. 23:16,17,19) **Like fire that consumes the dry stubble, so God's Word of Law went out to His people for a good reason: that they might be led to repentance, so they might turn away from the lies of the false prophets and again embrace the truth of God's Word.** Sadly few responded to God's Word and the WORD DIVIDED the people. **The 24th chapter of Jeremiah records a vision God gave Jeremiah of two baskets of figs which were placed in front of the Temple of the LORD—one had very good figs, the other rotten figs.** Like the good figs, God would watch over the exiles taken from Judah to Babylon, further purifying and refining His people. God promised that He would bring the godly back to their land, build them up once again and replant them. But the ungodly kings, priests, false prophets and the unrepentant people, like the bad figs which had spoiled, had no such word of promise to cling to. Instead, they had only a message of judgment for their lack of repentance and for their idolatry!

God's Word...like a fire burning away the chaff and purifying the metal, recalls the words of our text today: *"Is not My Word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"* THE WORD THAT DIVIDES is that **destructive** Word of the Law which calls sin what it is and condemns it *and the sinner along with it*, and that **constructive** Word of the Gospel which forgives sin and promises grace and mercy to the sinner. **No matter where we read in Holy Scripture we see THE WORD THAT DIVIDES going out from God in both Law and Gospel.** For example, the Word of God's Law and judgment were plainly seen in the great Flood, when water inundated the earth and a wicked, unrepentant humanity drowned amid the rising waters. Yet even in the midst of God's judgment over sin, the Word of His grace was also seen: the ark floated safely upon the waters with Noah's family and the animals! Water, on the one hand so destructive, on the other hand had constructively "cleansed" the earth of its sin. The threatened judgment had finally occurred after the time of grace came to an end but

the promise of good news was also graphically seen as God placed the rainbow in the sky as a constant reminder of the promise to all people that such a flood would never occur again. **Sin and grace, judgment and promise, Law and Gospel, THE WORD THAT DIVIDES.**

Even the central focus of the Christian faith, the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of the world, is an illustration of THE WORD THAT DIVIDES, of both Law and Gospel. Yes, clearest Gospel is heard in the words of John 3:16,17 *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."* The refreshing Gospel message contained in these verses remind us of God's love for all sinners and is living water for thirsty souls. **But in order for this good news to come to us, Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, the eternal Word made flesh, was sacrificed for us.** In our place and bearing all our sins, Jesus was consumed in the **fire** of God's wrath over all our transgressions under the Law. The hammer of God's Law nailed Christ to the cross but in those hammer blows also resounded the Gospel promise that the complete debt against God's Law was nailed to cross with Jesus who fully bore our sins, as the apostle Paul describes to the Colossians, *"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; **He took it away, nailing it to the cross.** And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."* (Col. 2:13-15) Consider the **sword** that pierced our Savior's side, from which flowed the water and the blood, and there be reminded of the **water** of our Baptism and our Savior's precious blood that cleanses us from all sin. With the powerful Word of God joined to the water of Holy Baptism, we were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, drowning the sinner in the death of Jesus and giving birth to the saint in Jesus' resurrection. And when you and I daily remember our baptism, we are drawing again upon the power of God's Word: the *destructive* drowning the Old Adam in the waters of our baptism and the *constructive* rising of the new creation we are in Christ Jesus, who in Baptism has cleansed us and made us His very own, born again and born of God!

As baptized children of our heavenly Father, we never outgrow THE WORD THAT DIVIDES, its **destructive** Word of the Law and **constructive** Word of the Gospel are used in our lives again and again. The fire of God's Word *"purges all unrighteous leaven,"* and purifies us from the dross and impurities of our sins so that we might serve Him in righteousness and

holiness. (Mal. 3:3) Yes, *"The word of God is **living** and **active**. **Sharper** than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."* (12) God's Word again and again lays bare our spiritual lives, cutting away all that is harmful to us so we might be healed. The sword of God's Word enters our hearts and brings life there!

The early church father, Augustine, once wrote about how the sword and fire of God's Word are beneficial to the Christian's life. He writes, *"What about the wounds that arrows of evil have caused within you? ...An evil word that deflects you from the path of faith...causes shadows to grow within. **If you listen to darkened words long enough, you will give in to them...**When we believe lies, a baneful forest grows within the soul and we become lost...and begin to wander in a dark forest of doubt, fear and worldliness. It is then you must allow God's Word like flaming arrows to penetrate your own soul again...The Word of God must come like a piercing arrow, bearing a flaming coal, so that this forest of worldly thoughts will be set on fire, become cleared ground where God may build His temple within. The devil comes to sow tares and darkness, to bring ruin to your soul. The words of God come like fire, so that when your heart is cleared, Christ can be built in you, a temple of eternal happiness.* (Homilies on the Psalms: 5)

Is there a dark and baneful forest within your heart today which desperately needs God's Word? Are there dark shadows are causing you doubt and fear so that you lose your way on the path to life eternal in Jesus Christ?

The Word of God is THE WORD THAT DIVIDES and will **purge** the unrighteous leaven from within your heart and mine and cleanse our hearts for heaven. The Word of God is THE WORD THAT DIVIDES and will **shatter** harmful and sinful attitudes we carry about from day to day and that same Word will build within our hearts a living faith. The Word of God is THE WORD THAT DIVIDES and will **cut away** all that is harmful to our souls so that we are truly healed by God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ.

May God's Word continue today and each day to consume and purify, shatter and build, cut and heal, drown and cleanse each one of us, for Jesus' sake. AMEN