

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Did anyone pick up on the theme of today's readings? In case you missed it, let me repeat a few choice phrases. Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!...Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Or how about this from Jeremiah : "Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" Or how about the New Revised Standard Version of Psalm 82: "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.... Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!"

Yes, it's judgment time! Well, not really; just figuratively. Or is it figuratively? Judgment's not a subject that we like to talk about. Judgment's not a subject that we like to think about. We're too happy in believing that things will continue on just as they are now – a happy life, nice summer weather, not a care in the world. We're too happy in believing that we're in control of our destiny. We make the decisions. We make the judgment calls.

But who are we kidding? We just don't want to think about the end. But if we take our faith seriously, we have to think about the end. Each week we say in the Creed that we believe Jesus will come again to judge the quick and the dead. What's that, but thinking and talking about the end – the time of judgment.

As I alluded to at the beginning of this sermon, the Bible gives us a lot of images of God as judge. The psalmist gives us one image of God as judge. "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the [rest of the heavenly assembly God]

holds judgment.” In the mythology of the ancient Near East, the council of the heavenly assembly was understood to be the place in which the governance of the universe was carried out. God rises in the council to accuse the heavenly assembly of not having maintained the right to justice for the weak and the poor. God accuses the heavenly assembly of judging unjustly and showing partiality to the wicked. God strips the heavenly assembly of their divine character and condemns them to mortality. If God judges the heavenly assembly like that for their judgment, how will God judge our judgments? Yet the psalmist, perhaps speaking for us, calls upon God to take over the rule of the nations and judge the earth. We don’t want to talk about judgment, but we want the righteous to be raised up, and we want the wicked to be judged accordingly.

And then we get to the image of God as judge, made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. But I would say this image of Jesus as judge clashes with our romanticized image of Jesus as peacemaker, reconciler, and friend. Listen to what Jesus says: “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!...Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided; three against two and two against three; they 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.” It sounds like a plot for a soap opera or one of those television talk shows. Imagine how popular Jesus must have been to the people hearing these words! We have a hard enough time getting people into church these days without laying some lines like these on them! But what is Jesus saying? I think it’s simply this: the promise of peace incarnate in Jesus becomes a threat of division if Jesus is rejected as the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world.

When the time of judgment comes, families may be divided. There will be those who believe, and there will be those who don’t believe. They may not be pitted against

one another, but they may meet different ends. That's why it's important to share our faith with our loved ones – with our husband or wife, with our son or daughter, with our mother or father, with our sister or brother. We can share with them the precious gift of faith. We can make a difference in their life. You know, I've always heard that the best way to get someone to come to church is to extend a personal invitation. And here at Holy Faith we have success in inviting friends to church. But why don't we start in the home? We could also bolster our attendance by bringing a family member to church. And who better to talk to about your faith than a family member? That's your unique ministry. That's where you can make a difference.

But as the Gospel, this is supposed to be the Good News of Jesus Christ. Where is the good news in Jesus' statement that he has come to bring fire and division to the earth? The ending of this morning's reading from the letter to the Hebrews, I think, gives us the answer. For those of faith, the time of judgment is nothing to be feared. As Christians we can dare to think and talk about the end because Jesus conquered the end through his death and resurrection. Our faith allows us to think and talk about the end and God's judgment. Indeed, we can welcome the end and God's judgment because of the assurances Jesus gives us if we have faith in him.

The Good News is that God has given us models for our faith. The letter to the Hebrews provides a history of those Israelites who were faithful to God. They surround us as a cloud of witnesses of what it means to be faithful to God. We undoubtedly have had people in our lives – parents, godparents, priests, teachers, friends – who were models of faith for us and who have served as witnesses of what it means to be faithful to God. But beyond them, God, our judge, has provided the prime example of the faithful endurance to which we are called, in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus had faith in God's judgment, even though it meant death on the cross, and Jesus received his glory in his everlasting reign with God the Father.

With such a cloud of witnesses, led by Jesus Christ, to inspire us in our faith, we can be a cloud of witnesses to others by our faithful endurance in the life God has given us, and by our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We can be a cloud of witnesses to our friends, to our colleagues at work or school or play, and especially to our families. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” from whence comes our judgment. Thanks be to God!

Amen.