

## **“Sacred Flame”**

### **Sermon on Sunday, August 17, 2025**

**Dear church,**

“Am I only a God nearby?” Jeremiah proclaimed. Did you hear that??? Every time we think we have captured the essence of our Scriptures or grasped the nature of God, the Spirit throws messages at us that challenge our certainties. So annoying! God cannot be reduced to one symbol or one way of thinking or one issue or one religion, as much as many of us would like that. Just when we think that the Lord is always near us, Jeremiah says no, there will be times in your life when the Lord is not so accessible to you. It probably has to do with a lack of openness or spiritual awareness on our part, but nevertheless, today’s Old Testament reading begins with a big provocation: “Am I only a God nearby, declares the Lord, and not a God far away?”

In fact, we must be especially careful when people claim that they have a direct line to God and a relationship so intimate that not a piece of paper fits between them and their God, a salvation so sure that they don’t seem to care about the world anymore. The prophets of the Old Testament frequently remind us that people can deceive themselves even with religion. Piety can become a cover, a shield, an escape that allows people to avoid working on issues they urgently need to address. Jeremiah found the worship of his time, filled with easy answers and certainties, disturbing because he saw issues that people needed to work on.

There is also good news in this message. This prophet gives us permission to acknowledge that God feels far away at times, that there are times when we lose touch with our faith. It happens. Believe me, it does happen. People have shared that with me. I have experienced it. Well, it’s not the end of the world. In fact, it may be some sort of beginning. Jeremiah says it’s better to acknowledge that drought and seek anew what might be missing than to pretend everything is o.k. Pretending may be a nice game for kids but in relationships, in our most precious relationships, pretending is not so helpful, right? The prophets have always known that. And what did Jesus say? “The truth will set you free.” That desire to be authentic, truthful to the core, spiritually alive is symbolized in our worship today in the metaphor of the Sacred Flame. Are you in touch with the sacred flame inside of you? Can you feel it burn deep inside your soul?

Jeremiah told people in so many words that they had lost touch with the Sacred Flame of Life. Worship at that time was too easy, was almost like being in auto pilot mode. Life was shallow in Israel. Injustices happened without an outcry in

Israel. That's why the first reading ends with those powerful words, meant to shake up his community: "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" The rock was referring to the heart of rulers and leaders misleading their flock. Hard as rock! Can you see how relevant that is to our times?

When people live in a pretend world, they are playing not with the sacred flame but with real fire. We increasingly live in pretend times. Lies pose as truth; people are deliberately misled. It's become shockingly normal. There's a word for that in the Bible. It might shock you. It's the word "diabolus," which means someone who confuses on purpose. In contrast, the sacred flame inside of us always inspires us to look for truth, to seek the better parts of our human nature, to befriend that which sustains not only us as individuals but also our community and culture. Are we in touch with the sacred flame inside of us?

In the gospel, Jesus offers up more serious words. He says, "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division." The reason is that Jesus is after real peace, not some foul compromise. The sacred flame is purifying.

The texts of this Sunday, harsh and edgy as they are, speak to our times. To use a metaphor often used in Scripture, we might say: God is mad. We have been told by real smart people that our planet is dangerously heating up. People feel it all over the globe. And it still gets dismissed. We keep playing our games and not doing nearly enough to address the issues that threaten life and nature as we know it. Is God mad? You bet. "Is not my word like fire and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" We may take this as a rule of thumb: when God gets angry in the Bible – and there are times like that – it's usually when people play with the truth.

Finally, let me go to another wisdom tradition. In the heart of ancient India's mythological history, gods walked alongside mortals. The veil between the spiritual and physical worlds was thin, and a mysterious fire was said to have been ignited. Not an ordinary fire born of flint or friction, but a sacred flame, eternal in its burn and divine in its origin - a fire that has, as per legends, continued to blaze since ancient times. This fire symbolizes purity, sacrifice, knowledge, and the unbroken spirit of something eternal. I believe it's essentially the same fire, the same symbol that Moses experienced in the wilderness, in the burning bush, when he was sent to free his people. It's the same flame that the disciples saw on Pentecost. We would be wise to stay in

touch with that sacred flame, to feel God and life through it, to become more whole, to be lovers of truth.

**Amen.**