**Sermon – “The Fire That Unites”**

Year C – Jeremiah 23:23–29, Psalm 82, Hebrews 11:29–12:2, Luke 12:49–56

I don’t know about you… **but the readings we’ve just heard are not easy.** [pause]
In Jeremiah, God’s word is a **fire** and a **hammer**—images that speak of breaking apart what is false.
In Luke, Jesus says He has come to bring fire to the earth, and that His coming will divide even families. [pause]
Hebrews recalls people who endured ridicule, prison, and even death for their faith. [pause]

At first glance… none of this feels gentle.
There’s no “soft and safe” here. [pause]
Instead, we are confronted with the **cost of faith**, the urgency of truth, and the reality that following Jesus means taking a stand. [pause]

**And yet—** there is hope in every one of these passages. [pause]
Hope, not because the world is easy, but because **God is near.** Near to the persecuted. Near to the suffering. Near to those who choose Him above all else. [pause]
And we know this nearness is real… *because Christ Himself walked the road of suffering*— at times misunderstood by His family, rejected by His own people, betrayed by friends, and enduring the cross. [pause]
The One who calls us to follow is the One who has gone before us… sharing in our pain so that He might also share His victory with us. [long pause]

**A Story from Today’s Church**

A few years ago, Open Doors told the story of “Mariam” *(not her real name)*, a young Christian in Central Asia. [pause]
She had secretly been reading the Bible for months, hiding it under her bed. One day, her father found it. In anger, he tore it from her hands, shouted that she had betrayed the family… and threw her out of the house. [pause]

With nowhere to go, Mariam went to her church. [pause]
Women she barely knew welcomed her, gave her a bed, shared their food, and prayed with her. [pause]
Later she said: *“I lost my home, but I found something better—my family in Christ.”* [long pause]

**1. God Is Near to the Persecuted**

In Jeremiah, God asks: *“Am I a God near by… and not a God far off?”* [pause]
For Mariam, and for many on the **Open Doors World Watch List**, this truth is their lifeline.
God’s presence cannot be locked away or silenced. [pause]

Even when believers lose everything—job, safety, even family—they are **never abandoned**. [pause]
The God who spoke through Jeremiah is the same God who walks with them today.

**2. Called Into a New Family**

In the reading from the psalm, we heard about God’s heart for the vulnerable: *“Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.”* [pause]

Persecution often makes people “spiritual orphans,” cut off from everything familiar. [pause]
But God calls His people into a **new family**—His family. [pause]
The church becomes their home, their support, their place of belonging.

And if we belong to Christ, we are part of **one body** with them. [pause]
Their suffering is *our* concern. Their faith, and their perseverance is *our* encouragement.

**3. The Faith of Those Before Us**

Hebrews 11 lists the heroes of faith—people who endured hardship because they trusted God. [pause]
And then it turns to us: *“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus.”* [pause]

The persecuted church lives this reality daily.
Their faith is not cultural habit—it is a deliberate decision to follow Christ, knowing it may cost everything.

**4. Choosing Christ Above All Else**

In Luke, Jesus says His fire will cause division—not because He loves conflict, but because following Him **demands a choice**. [pause]

For Mariam, that choice meant losing her earthly family. [pause]
For us, it may not be as dramatic, but it is still a daily decision—
to put Christ first in our priorities, our time, our spending, and our relationships. [pause]
And always… it means loving our neighbour, even when it costs us.

**5. God’s Fire: Refining and Empowering**

The hope in these readings is not the absence of hardship—it’s the certainty of God’s presence in it. [pause]
Fire can destroy, yes—
but in God’s hands it **refines**, strengthens, and forges something new.

And this fire is not only refining—**it is empowering**. [pause]
At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came as tongues of fire, filling the disciples with courage to speak and strength to endure. [pause]
And that same Spirit still burns in God’s people today— God’s fire in us gives strength to persevere when the race is long and the path is hard. [pause] It burns away fear and fuels faith.

It turns weary disciples into bold witnesses. It is the fire that keeps us running when everything in us wants to stop. [pause]

Maybe our faith hasn’t cost us our family, and ‘I thank God for that’. [pause] Maybe we haven’t been threatened or cast out of our community.

But let’s make no mistake, walking the path of Christ costs; real faith is not cheap! But the example of the saints, the example of our persecuted brothers and sisters remind us that Jesus is worth the cost. [pause]

And we are called to live as part of His new family—running with perseverance, loving deeply, and trusting that the Spirit who sustained the saints of old will empower us too. [long pause]

**Closing Prayer:**
Heavenly Father,
We thank You that You are near, even in the fire. [pause]
Strengthen our persecuted brothers and sisters; give them courage and peace. [pause]
Fill us afresh with the fire of Your Holy Spirit—
that we may persevere with joy, love boldly, and stand firm in faith. [pause]
Let Your refining and empowering fire burn away all that is false,
and kindle in us the hope of Your kingdom—
until the day we see You face to face.
Amen.