**Luke 12:49-53** September 8, 2019

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*Luke 12:49 “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! 51 Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. 52From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. 53They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Jesus: Bringing of Peace or Division?**

One day this week my wife asked what the Sunday sermon was going to be about. So I recited the first words of the reading: ***“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”*** She said, “Wow! Who made you grouchy?”

She was just having fun, but it does bring up a really good point: How do I choose a word of God for a given Sunday? Do I just look around the and think, “A lot of people have been talking about that lately.” Do I notice what kinds of bad habits and sins people are getting into and say, “We need a sermon about that!” Do I once in a while get in a bad mood and let it show? How do I decide what to preach on on a Sunday?

The vast majority of the time, we follow a reading list called a lectionary. It is a three year list of weekly readings. The backbone of this list follows the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. One year the Gospel readings are from Matthew, the next year from Mark and John mixed together, the third year from Luke. (This year we are looking at Luke.) From June to November, the Gospel readings march straight through the teachings of Jesus. In the last two weeks we had readings from Luke chapter 12. Next week will be chapter 13, the next chapter 14. In the lectionary the other two readings, the Old Testament and Epistle, follow the lead of the Gospel. They cherry-pick other readings to match the Gospel. One week from Genesis, the next from Isaiah, and so forth. If you ever want to see those reading lists, they are in the front part of your hymnals on page 163.

Which is all to say that I didn’t choose this reading because I woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Today’s reading, even though it is pretty intense, is part of a wider Christian reading list used in thousands of churches around the world. It is designed to cover all the main points of Christian faith in a year. You’ll notice these lists don’t shy away from strange or difficult things that Jesus said.

**A: “I have come to bring fire!”**

That may solve whywe have this reading, but it leaves us with the question of why Jesus said: ***“I have come to bring fire on the earth.”***

Didn’t Jesus come to bring peace on earth. Isn’t that what the Christmas angels said? Didn’t they tell the shepherds out in their fields at night, *“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace…?”* (Luke 2:14) Didn’t Jesus, somewhere else say, *“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world?”* (John 3:17) What is Jesus talking about when he says he has come to bring fire? Not just that, he adds, ***“How I wish it were already kindled!”*** Why is he so eager to see the fire burning!

Let’s back up a bit and look at some events from about this time in Jesus’ life.

There she lay, a girl of twelve. She had been on the brink of growing out of the sweetness of childhood, to become the young woman her parents had hoped. Now she was dead. Father and mother stood in the tiny bedroom next to Jesus, weeping. Three of his disciples were there too. What sorrow! Then Jesus took her by the hand and with a death-defying order told her, “*Get up!*” She did! They had their little girl back! What joy! *“He gave strict orders not to tell anyone about this.”* (Mark 5:40-43) Are you kidding?

Same thing when Jesus healed a man with the incurable disease of leprosy. And again when he healed two blind men outside of the city of Jericho. And when Jesus asked his disciples who he was, and one of them rightly answered, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,”*—Jesus told them too to be quiet. And after they saw Jesus changed into glowing glory on a mountaintop—that event we call the Transfiguration —Jesus ordered their silence. “Don’t tell anyone!”

Time and again Jesus proved that he is the Son of God. Time and again he told his disciples and the witnesses to hush up. If Jesus came to save the world, why didn’t he want the world to know?

We know how important it is to tell other people about Jesus. If the news about Jesus is not shared, people cannot believe and be saved. They will be condemned to hell. But for a short time, Jesus told people to hush up. The reason Jesus had to tell them to be quiet was that they didn’t really know what he was about. While they could see his amazing power to heal, to feed, to teach, none could understand the main reason he came. None could imagine the cross. None could imagine the soldiers hammering home the nails. None could imagine laying Jesus’ body in the tomb, and then finding nothing on the third day. None could see that he had to do all that as a payment for our sins. And so Jesus said—no, he commanded—his disciples, his patients and the bystanders to be quiet until they knew how the thing ended.

Jesus came to do something, to save the world, but it had to unfold over three years’ time. Only at the end, when people had seen the cross, the spear, the tomb, the rolled away stone, only when they knew the full story could the Gospel of our Savior from sin be unleashed upon the world, the fire kindled.

That is what brings us to our strange reading today, yearning words of Jesus to unleash this Gospel message upon the earth: ***“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”*** That’s Jesus’ impatience, if I can accuse him of such. He wishes the fire were burning, but it can’t until verse 50 happens: ***“But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed.”*** The fire Jesus desires can’t get started until this “baptism.”

For us, the word “baptism” is a church word for something very specific that we do in church. We can hardly imagine “baptism” in another sense. But the word “baptize,” in the language Jesus spoke and in the usage of his day, was often used as a figure of speech to mean when someone was “overwhelmed with catastrophe” (Stein, 364). When Jesus said, “I have a baptism to undergo” he was not referring to a literal baptism, but to the moment when the great crisis of his life would take place. He was talking about his suffering and death on the cross. Jesus wished for that moment to hurry up and get done.

Students know how Jesus felt. You have a final exam in a subject you never do well in. The test is today a 3pm. Right now it is 11am. How do you count down? Do you say, “Only four more hours until the test.” No! You say, “Only six more hours *until the test is over*.” For things we fear, we don’t count down to their beginning but to their end.

So terrible was the work that Jesus had to go and do on our behalf that he did not look forward to the crucial moment on the cross, but to the end of those crucial moments on the cross: ***“I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed.”*** He did that for us!

He knew the punishment he would have to suffer for our sins. He knew the tortured death in body, and even worse the abandonment by God the Father. He knew he would die and body and soul separated for three days. Jesus was distressed over that. Perhaps you even remember him pleading over this in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before his death.

He wanted that to be over. He wanted his tortured work to be done. Then a new day could dawn. Then the message of salvation could be carried by speedy messengers to the ends of the earth. He wanted his baptism over and the Gospel fires kindled.

Thank God that we live in a time when the Gospel is reaching to the four corners of the earth! When it is free to come to us and our families and neighborhoods.

**B: “I Have Come to Bring Division!”**

Sadly, not all welcome this fire of the Gospel with open arms. About this fire Jesus said, ***“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.”*** Have you ever thought of Jesus as a home wrecker? Jesus says he is!

If someone divides families. We imagine that before the divider came, whoever he might be, everything was calm and happy. All was good. Then somebody came in and ruined things. When Jesus says that he came to bring division on earth, we imagine him ruining a good thing. Even if we are on Jesus’ side, our thoughts might be, “Why did he do that? Why divide people, and create bickering and insults? Jesus, do you realize what you did?”

But that has it exactly wrong. Without Jesus, there is no division, because without Jesus no one is going to heaven. All humanity is in the same boat, headed for hell, condemned for their own sins. Without Jesus there is no division because there is no salvation.

Humanity is a sea of happy-go-lucky people, headed for hell in a handbasket. But with Jesus bursting into the scene, suddenly the Holy Spirit leads people to Jesus. He causes people to realize their sins and their sinfulness. They realize that they need a Savior, and they cry out to and cling to and trust in him. Meanwhile others hear about a Savior and refuse to believe.

Jesus divides homes. It is not that Jesus desired such. But because many refuse to listen to his call to faith, homes are divided. Some believe in Jesus, and some don’t. Some worship on Sundays, some refuse. Worse yet, Jesus is a source of conflict in some houses. One loving him, another cursing him.

This is a heavy burden to bear for the people whose house has been divided over Christ Jesus. If you have a house that is not divided over Christ, remember to regularly thank God that he has saved you that heartache. Additionally, realize that you have something to offer those who do not have the blessing of an undivided family in Christ. If you are blessed with a family undivided over Christ Jesus, do not sit there smugly thinking that you must have everything figured out. You have a blessing for others.

Part of the reason God has gathered us together in this family of believers we call Faith Lutheran Church, is so that we can be that family for other people. Here God was especially thinking of those orphaned by their natural families. Their families have no time for Jesus, for his kingdom.

Remember another time when Jesus was out teaching: *“A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.’ ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ he asked. Then [Jesus] looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’”* (Mark 3:34-35).

We Christians cannot hide the division between Christ’s people and the rest of the world. We cannot pretend it doesn’t exist. The message of Christ Jesus burns in our own hearts. We look at those who are lost, and we feel some of the same fire that Jesus felt when he looked at the crowds around him and said, ***“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”*** And we look at those whose houses are divided over the message of Jesus, and we find joy in calling them “Brother,” “Sister.” Amen.