

FIRE AND DIVISION
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Text: Luke 12:49-56

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 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.”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Years ago, when I was doing a hospital chaplaincy internship, I walked into the room of a woman who I’d say was probably in her late-sixties, early-seventies. I introduced myself, told her I was just doing my rounds, and asked her how her day was going.

That was my usual approach. Whenever I met a new patient, I always tried to be as laid-back as possible. No one wants to feel like someone’s pushing religion on them when they’re lying in a hospital bed. But this time, I could tell it wasn’t working. She seemed very tense. She didn’t smile. She wasn’t interested in small talk. She answered my questions, but only with yes/no responses.

“Do you live in Marin County?”

“Yes.”

“Are you from here?”

“No.”

“Do you have any family nearby?”

“No.”

So, I took the hint, and I was about to move on when all of a sudden she looked at me and said, “Young man, I’m going to tell you something that’s probably going to shock you.” I said, “Okay,” wondering where this was going. Then she told me she thought organized religion was the worst thing that had ever happened to humankind. And after she said it, she looked at me like she was waiting to see my reaction. I think she expected me to run out of the room in tears or something.

Honestly, she did put me back on my heels a little. But she’d been watching the news before I came in, and the TV was still on, and out of the corner of my eye I could see images from the latest round of violence in the Middle East: Israeli soldiers in riot gear; young Palestinians throwing rocks and bottles.

So, I didn’t share her opinion, obviously, but I definitely understood where she was coming from. Religion has been at the heart

of many wars and conflicts. There's just no denying it.

That conversation came back to me this week when I first looked at today's gospel reading. Jesus makes this startling announcement. He tells the disciples he came to bring fire to the earth, and instead of peace, division. Even families, he says, will be split apart—fathers against sons and mothers against daughters.

It sounds pretty harsh, and it makes me wonder what happened to the nice, gentle Jesus, who welcomes little children into his arms? This fire-breathing Jesus seems like a totally different person. And honestly, he's kinda scary. But if you listen closely, he's not trying to frighten anyone. He's just being honest. He's warning the disciples that following him is not going to make their lives easy.

Why? Because from the very start, Jesus' message has been, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." In other words, Change how you're living. Start behaving in ways that reflect the new day of peace and justice God is bringing. Which doesn't sound very radical or threatening, but given the world we live in, it actually is.

This is a world where the powerful dominate the weak, and the rich exploit the poor. And Jesus is telling the disciples to go out and live lives that fly in the face of all that, lives that show people there's a better way, and that's going to ruffle some feathers. People who like the way things are, people who are committed to the status quo, are not going to be happy. And you can bet they're going to push back.

And no one's going to face more push back than Jesus himself, which he's painfully aware of. "I have a baptism to undergo," he says, "and how distressed I am until it is completed." You can hear the strain in his voice. It's weighing him down. And yet, for the sake of the kingdom, he keeps going forward.

So, here's the point: living into the world as it could be inevitably puts us at odds with people who want to hang on to the world as it is. And that's daunting. But we have to be brave, like Jesus. We have to follow his example and keep pushing toward the future he proclaimed. Because the alternative is to give in to despair and live without hope.

So, imagine a girl who sees her classmates making fun of another student. Her faith tells her to speak up, but she knows she'd be risking a lot. She could lose friends. She could end up getting bullied herself. Still, she does the right thing and tells her classmates to stop.

Or picture a man who finds out his company is cutting corners in ways that could get people hurt or maybe even killed. His faith tells him he can't just stand by and watch, but he knows there's going to be a price to pay. He could lose his job. He could ruin his career. Still, he listens to his conscience and blows the whistle.

Both of them are ordinary people, living ordinary lives. But their faith leads them to make choices that reveal the kingdom of heaven, despite the fact that those choices have consequences.

This is what Jesus is talking about. When we listen to him and live by God's values, it's going to cause friction. It's going to challenge people who live by the world's values. But this is how the seeds of God's future get planted—through real people making faithful choices, even when it costs them.

That brings us back to Jesus' words about fire. It's hard to hear him talk like that. It makes us feel uncomfortable, probably because we mostly think of fire as a destructive force. But fire also purifies and refines. It gives warmth and light.

I think that's the kind of fire Jesus has in mind. Fire that burns away all that's not in line with the world as God envisions it. Fire that illumines the life that's waiting for us, if

we can just reach out and claim it. Fire that sets our hearts ablaze with possibility.

So, when Jesus says he came to bring fire to the earth, I hear that as a promise. A promise that God will never give up on the world. A promise that God's new day of peace and justice is right around the corner. And a promise that the fire of God's love will keep burning—in us, and through us—until the whole world is made new.

I only wish I'd been able to say all that to that woman in the hospital years ago. In some ways, she was right. Religion has been at the heart of many wars and conflicts. But Jesus always looked beyond that. His message was always about love—love that can heal any wound and transcend any division. That's the fire he brings, and that's the fire he invites us to carry into the world. Amen.