

The Fire Sign  
August 18, 2019

Luke 12:49-56 NRSV

“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?

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“I came to bring fire to the earth,” to set the world ablaze, the man cries. He speaks about baptism, and his hearers might think of Old Testament readings about being overwhelmed by the waters. He says that he has come to bring division, to set family members against one another. It sounds like the language of terrorists, of people who will ruin the world if they can’t rule it.

But the one who is speaking is Jesus, the one who is supposed to be the Prince of Peace. “Love your enemies,” he told people; and “My peace I give to you,” he would say to his disciples.” The contrast between his proclamations of peace and his words about fire and division make us want to challenge him. Why are you offering us peace and then telling us that war is coming?

But there is nothing to be gained by challenging Jesus. His words will remain as his challenge to us. “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky” — that is, to read the weather for when storms are coming — he says a few verses later. Clearly, you are capable of reading and interpreting signs of the earth, which takes intelligence, care and discernment. So, “why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” Can’t you see the sign before you? Can’t you see what’s going on around you? Why are you unable to understand the meaning of the fire that is coming? Don’t you *want* to understand?

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Jesus came to proclaim the peaceful reign of God and to make it possible for people to share fully in *shalom*, the peace of God. But what will happen if people don’t **want** to accept the gift of peace because they can benefit from conflict? Jesus announced the nearness of the kingdom of God, a realm in which “no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the

strength of love.” But how will that do any good if people reject the peaceable kingdom? How can there be peace then?

Jesus began his ministry by announcing that kingdom, along with calling people to turn away from sin and back to God. In Mark 1:15 he said, “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” That was a call for decision — to turn back to God or continue in sin. It is, in one sense of the word, a *crisis*, a decisive moment — we have to go one way or the other. If you think you can put off making the decision, you’ve made the wrong decision.

Jesus’ very presence — who he is and what he does — provokes a crisis. He said, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Luke 11:23). What Jesus means by “interpreting the present time” is recognizing that this is a time of decision so that we can make the *right* decision. To ignore the choice or to put it off is to reject him.

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What is it that provoked a crisis? Jesus and his message clashed with the way society operated. The leaders of the religious establishment had their own ideas about righteousness and the true way to serve God, and they saw Jesus as a threat. And apart from religious considerations, Jesus’ sayings that the first would be last and the last first and that the poor were blessed didn’t sound like things that people who were already well off wanted to happen.

The larger Roman Empire already was a kingdom with Caesar at its head, and Jesus’ language about a coming “kingdom of God” sounded disloyal. If the God of Israel was going to be king, Caesar couldn’t be. When, after Easter, Jesus’ disciples went out and started to win converts who refused to acknowledge Roman deities or sacrifice to the one who was supposed to guide the emperor, the world was set ablaze. Just as Jesus predicted.

Today people in this country aren’t being persecuted for professing faith in Jesus Christ, despite what some might say. And despite declines, Christianity is the predominant religion in America. But the message that Jesus proclaimed, which isn’t always the same as what’s offered as Christianity, is in tension with common ideas that many Americans hold. His teachings that we are to help those in need, and that the poor are blessed, clash with the popular slogan “God helps those who help themselves.” (That, by the way, doesn’t come from the Bible but from Benjamin Franklin.) And the point that Jesus made with his parable of the Good Samaritan is in glaring contrast to the attitudes that many in our society have about refugees and people of color or other religions.

Just look at the present time. There are issues (still) surround gender, health care, gun violence, economic justice, fair wages, public education, prison reform, ecological destruction, racism, white privilege, xenophobia ... just to name a few. These are the inequalities and the social justice issues in which Jesus spoke about then and still plague our society 2,000 years later.

So, there is tension and strife. There are divisions, bad feelings and sometimes fighting among members of families and groups in society. Sometimes the fire dies down, but then it blazes up again somewhere else. Do we want to understand? Do we even want the peace of God’s Kingdom?

But Jesus wasn’t an arsonist, a firebug who puts a torch to a building and stands back to enjoy the flames. He is the first one upon whom the fire of judgment falls. His words about a baptism that he had to undergo might have reminded people of scriptural references to such troubles as a mighty flood, but those who had heard John the Baptist would think of his promise that the one to come after him would baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). Don’t forget that while fire may be destructive, it is also purifying.

Those words about family members being divided against one another are loosely quoted from the prophet Micah (Micah 7:6), but Jesus could say them quite accurately about himself. His brothers didn’t believe in him, and his family once went to try to get him and drag him home because

people were saying that he was out of his mind. Jesus would eventually be abandoned by his closest disciples, betrayed by one and denied by another. His passion and death on a cross were the conclusion of his fiery baptism.

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The crisis, the time to decide, for Jesus' hearers was 2,000 years ago. But his challenge to us is still "Why do you not know how to interpret the *present* time?" The crisis for us is today, and Jesus' words are not about a time in the past. And when I say "today," I mean *today*. They are not just about something that happened to you in the past, whether it was your baptism, inviting Jesus into your heart, having a born-again experience or however you put it. Each day we are called to follow Christ. We are called to make a decision.

And choosing to follow Christ is not automatic. Before the person of Jesus' person and his message cause divisions and clashes in society, they cause divisions and clashes within each one of us. We are faced with the choice between putting Christ first and putting something else first — ourselves or some other idol that we choose.

We are called to make that choice: either Christ or something else. And making the right choice confronts us, paradoxically, with a subtle temptation. It's easy to think that making the right decision is the way we do our share in the work of salvation. As one tract put it, "God decides for you, Satan decides against you. How will you decide?" As if God and you each do your share.

But in reality, what saves us is simply the fact that in Christ, God has decided in our favor. "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit," Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 12:3. The Holy Spirit doesn't believe for you, but you can't do it without the Spirit's gift.

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" The fire of destruction. The fire of purification. What about the fire inside of you? In John 2:17, after Jesus went through the temple overturning the tables of money changers and causing chaos for those defiling God's temple, the disciples recalled that it was written (in Psalm 69:9), "Zeal for [God's] house will consume me." May that zeal fill us now.

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