**August 18, 2019 Luke 12:49-56**

***It’s Not a Bonfire***

**Scripture:** Luke 12:49-56 NRSV

(49)"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! (50)I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! (51)Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! (52)From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; (53)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." (54)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. (55)And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. (56)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?

**Notes:**

1. We don’t like to talk about Jesus; angry and filled with ***wrath***.
   1. The ***wrath*** of God is a hard sale.
   2. Never assume Jesus’ ***anger*** has no place in our culture.
   3. God isn’t safe, but God is ***good***.
2. ***Holy*** ***anger*** must be viewed through a lens of God’s love,
   1. The anger of God is grounded in ***love***, and offers ***hope***.
   2. Refining a precious metal removes all the ***impurities***.
   3. God is our ***refiner***,
3. The fire of God’s anger is directed at ***sin***.
   1. God is not just the refiner by the fire; God is the ***fire***.
   2. Crisis is that edge where ***change*** is possible.
4. See each crisis as an opportunity for God to do a new ***thing***?
   1. Plants become ***stronger*** because they faced the flame and endured its heat.
   2. Heat triggers dormant seeds to open and fall in the ***rich*** ***soil***.
   3. Fire ***enables*** new life and new creation.
5. We are given the opportunity to trust in God’s ***goodness***.
   1. God is ***with*** ***you*** in the fire.
   2. The ashes are the starting point for ***new*** ***life***.
   3. God sees ***promise*** and ***hope***.

**Transcript:**

I love Campfires and Bonfires. When we go camping we try to sit by a campfire at least some of the evenings. As Jan and I prepare to head out for our destination. We may try to make a fire one or more of the evenings. There is something relaxing and calming as you watch the flames, bouncing around the wood, licking at the night sky. Some of my favorite moments were sitting around a campfire fire, letting the flames carry me away as I sink deep within the flames and my thoughts.

But not all flames are so calming or relaxing. I’ve seen in the news the past few weeks of fires consuming homes and dwellings on an increasing amount. This past Sunday there was news of a fire in an overnight daycare. Five people perished in that fire, all of them children; four children were clients, three of which were a firefighter’s; the fifth was the owner’s child; very sad news. The flames have a way of turning our emotions into terror. The real danger many times in a fire is smoke inhalation. Yet the fear of being burnt makes us cringe; nobody wants to feel the pain and anguish of a burn; the heat makes us pull back; a loss of our senses begins, as we become dizzy and confused.

Perhaps this is why Jesus uses the words in our passage today. Jesus is trying to strike fear in the hearts of every man, woman, and child. He is trying to make them aware of where they stand and trying to convince them that they need to make some serious changes or they will feel the heat of this fire of which he speaks. Turn with me today, as we hear Jesus’ words from Luke 12:49-56

*(49)"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! (50)I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! (51)Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! (52)From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; (53)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." (54)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. (55)And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. (56)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? (Luke 12:49-56 NRSV)*

Jesus has been hanging out in Galilee and by today’s passage he is traveling toward Jerusalem. Crowds continue to gather and grow wherever he goes… because, well, he’s a pretty cool guy. He’s been healing folks along the way. Demons are cast out. He’s even trending on Twitter … #JesusIsAwesome. You can almost imagine him with a cool pair of shoes, a classy T-shirt with a nice sport jacket over top and a cup of Starbucks in hand. And not surprisingly, Jesus has been teaching as he goes. A parable here, an exhortation there, in fact, earlier in chapter 12 of Luke, Jesus’ words feel rather reassuring and cozy… he tells his followers not to worry, to consider the birds of the air and lilies of the field, reminding them that they are precious in God’s sight. And hear his words of comfort “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32) This is my kind of Jesus… the kind of Jesus everybody wants to be around with his gentle hipster ways and kindly style

But then we fast forward to today’s passage and we shake our head in disbelief. Somebody has sucked the joy right out of his day. He sounds angry, frustrated, and on the verge of something crazy, “I have come to bring fire to the earth, and oh how I wish it were blazing already! Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No! I’ve come for division!” Jesus is confronting and disrupting and turning things upside down. Well then; what happened to considering the lilies of the field; what happened to our preciousness in God’s sight. Where did this angry Jesus come from? Maybe we need to schedule him a visit with Dr. Phil or Jerry Springer? Maybe another cup of coffee would calm him down.

We don’t really like to talk about this Jesus. This Jesus comes off as angry and filled with wrath. He sounds as if he wants to intimidate those who are listening. He seems like the type of religious fanatic who would picket funerals in protest. Sounds like a televangelist using scare tactics so you make donations to their ministry. He sounds like the type of soap box preacher standing on a street corner embarrassing the meek followers of Christ. Think about this and be honest, Christians do not need any more bad publicity.

The wrath of God is a hard sale. We don’t have kids memorizing these verses at children’s camp or Teen camp. We don’t find these verses embroidered on lacy doilies or needlepoint wall hangings. You won’t find it on t-shirts or posters in your teen’s bedroom. When we hear Jesus speaking like this, we can understand why his mother and brothers came looking for him to take him home. He is beginning to sound a little crazy. Yet we cannot skip over these passages and assume they were never said. We must never assume that Jesus anger has no place in our modern culture. In fact I believe that Jesus would be just as indignant today in our culture as He was back then. I believe that Jesus would be just as angry with us as he was angry with them, and maybe even more so. So let’s look at something a little less grownup.

I thoroughly enjoyed the book The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe; an allegory written about Jesus and what he brings to our world. In this novel four siblings enter an enchanted world named Narnia through a wardrobe. This world is filled with all kinds of talking animals and mythical creatures. It is ruled by a Lion named Aslan, the original Lion King. In one scene Lucy the youngest of the four siblings strikes up a conversation with a Beaver. In the conversation they begin to talk about Aslan. And Lucy asks about Aslan, “Is he quite safe?” To which Mr. Beaver replies, “Safe?... Who said anything about safe? ‘course he isn’t safe. But He’s good.”

Of course God isn’t safe, but God is good. There are those in the kingdom of God who like to dwell on the fiery rage of God…the seemingly “unsafe” parts that scare us and seem to be trying to coerce us into obedience…but that kind of thinking leaves little room for the goodness of God. Many parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles realize the anger that can come in the midst of real love. I have heard it said, “Before I had kids, I never knew I could love so much, or that any one person could make me so angry.” Loving parents know the heartache and rage that bubbles up when a beloved child becomes enchanted by or entangled in things that lead to their child’s grief or harm.

And like that of a parents’ love, God’s anger, holy anger must always be viewed through a lens of God’s love, which may feel fierce and overwhelming, but we know as fundamentally good. There is a difference between wrath that is rooted in hatred and wrath that is grounded in profound love. Anger that draws its energy from hatred is dedicated to destruction and death, but anger that is motivated by love is dedicated to growth, edification and learning; learning that is helpful and inspiring, but has a sting to it. Like peroxide, merthiolate, or mercuro chrome, it stings a little when its applied but it is going to help healing begin. The anger of a good God may not feel easy or loving, but because it is grounded in love, it is offered with hope for your building up and your flourishing, not your destruction. This anger seeks only to destroy the things that could ultimately destroy and harm.

And when we think about fire; in the book of Daniel, the young Jewish boys, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego find themselves facing execution by an angry King Nebuchadnezzar because they would not worship the King’s idol. They are thrown into a fiery furnace of blazing fire and yet are left unharmed. When the king looks into the blazing furnace, he doesn’t see their destruction but his eyes are transformed and opened to the presence of God. This was a fire that burned, but didn’t destroy. The prophet Malachi refers to God the refiner who sits by the fire. (Malachi 3:2-3) We don’t have a whole lot of professional refiners around the market these days. But in ancient times, a silversmith or goldsmith did show up on occasion. The process of refining a precious metal removes all the impurities from it…to enable it to be molded and shaped free from things that mar and deform the metal and lessen its value. It is a fine art, which requires careful attention. The refiner is attentive and deliberate, carefully watching the silver as he holds it in the fire until the silver is purified. This is a fire that burns, but doesn’t destroy. There is a story of a woman who visits a silversmith. She asks him how he knows when the silver is refined. The silversmith responds, “When I can see my face in the silver.” God is our refiner, carefully holding his gaze on each of us as he refines us just as he refines a precious metal until it reflects his own image back to him.

The fire of God’s anger is directed at injustice, oppression, at sin in the world and our lives…and it burns away until what is precious and beautiful is revealed. This fire purifies us and teaches us so that we are transformed into the likeness of Christ. It is no wonder fire has also come to signify the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a fire that burns, but doesn’t destroy. But let’s be honest, we’re talking about fire. And we all know that fire does burn. And burns hurt. The process of transformation is not always one without pain. Anyone who has been through significant personal transformation knows this pain first hand.

The good news for us is that God is not just the refiner by the fire the one who places us into the fire but God is the fire. God is right there with us in the searing heat of the flames, burning with us until all is made pure. 2 Timothy (1:6) says “fan into flame the gift of God that is in you.” Our God, who is fire, yearns for his story to come blazing to life in us, and for our lives to reveal the beautiful, precious, and loving vision of God.

There are people in our midst who capture God’s beautiful vision for the world, Modern day prophets and they become enraged by the injustices they see, they are enraged by the ways precious lives are too often compromised. There is a reason the terms “angry” and “prophet” so often go together. Lisa Fithian is a prominent social advocate and voice for justice since the 1970s. She gave an interview a few years ago said, “When people ask me, ‘What do you do?’ I say I create crisis, because crisis is that edge where change in possible.”2

Crisis is that edge where change is possible. There are not many gifts to be found in the fires of a crisis, especially when that crisis feels like it could destroy and devour you. But one gift that crisis can offer, at both an individual level as well as a social level, is the opportunity for self-examination an opportunity for communal-examination as well as prodding us to a possible change of course. Individual crisis or social crises allows us to delve into the depths of our heart, it allows us to delve into God’s heart; to seek God’s edifying transformation of our lives. What would it be like to see each crisis as an opportunity for change? What would it be like to see each crisis as an opportunity for transformation? What would it be like to see each crisis as an opportunity for God to do a new thing?

We’ve heard of the tragic wildfires over the past couple of years. Wildfires in California, wildfires in the western plains even wildfires in Yellowstone national park. But did you know a forest that is affected by fire experiences plant adaptation. In this, plants and trees often adapt to be more resistant to fire… they become stronger and more resistant in the face of future danger; because they faced the flame and endured its heat.

Also, there is increased growth in the forest after a fire… the heat from the fire triggers dormant pinecone seeds to pop open; otherwise these seeds would stay dormant forever and the seeds fall into the charred and ashy rich soil, which has become a mysteriously rich soil for new life to burst forth. If provided adequate sunlight and moisture, these seeds will bring forth a new forest and new life. Environmental experts are now realizing the importance of fire for the pruning and regeneration of forests. Fire is important to enable new life and new creation to burst from the earth.

When Jesus says “I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” We are given the opportunity to trust in God’s goodness, even in the midst of the blaze, we are given the opportunity to be edified… to stand in the fire that burns, but doesn’t destroy. The next time you feel the heat of life burning around you, and the smoke is so thick you can’t see even your next steps…the next time you find yourself standing in the midst of the flames of crisis…remember the strange fire of God. Remember that God is with you in the fire, and that you are being molded into something precious.

Like the ashes left after the forest fire produce rich soil, the ashes left behind after the strange fire of God’s refining are the starting point for new life. This has been true from the beginning. God has used dust and ash to create since the Garden of Eden, kneeling in the soil breathing new life. And God can and does do this with us today. God kneels in the dirt and ash, gently whispering and tending, patiently cherishing and coaxing new life out of places that appear charred and ruined. Where we see only worthless destruction, God sees promise and hope in this burned and ashy ground, new life is gonna come

As we close today, we have opportunity to participate in the Lord’s Supper one of the most precious sacraments of the church. It is a sacrament that is not to be taken recklessly, or without regard for what it means. It is meant for those who have given their hearts and lives to Christ. One does not come to Christ so they may come to the table… one comes to the table because they have whole heartedly come to Christ. If you are in need of God’s touch; if you could use the Holy Fire in your life, I invite you to come to the Lord. If you need to experience the saving grace of Jesus, don’t hesitate, come to Jesus today.