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August 18, 2019

I COME TO BRING FIRE LUKE 12:49-56

Let us pray: God of justice, your word is light and truth. Let your face shine on us to restore us, that we may walk in your way, seeking justice and doing good. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you oh Lord. Amen.

Three men died and were waiting to receive entrance through the Pearly Gates. The first man said to St. Peter, "I was a preacher of the gospel, serving faithfully for over 50 years". Peter told him to step aside for further consideration.

The second man said, "I was also a preacher of the gospel; I served my church faithfully for 40 years". Peter told him to step aside for further consideration.

The third man stepped up and said, "I was not a preacher, just a government worker with the Internal Revenue Service for 6 months". Peter told him to step right in.

The first minister objected, "Why does he get to go in before two ministers?" Peter said, "The truth is, in six months the Internal Revenue agent scared the devil out of more people than either of you did in a long lifetime!"

Jesus' harsh words is trying to scare the crowds. Jesus has just warned the disciples of the need to be ready for His coming when He will judge every person. Jesus shows that His purpose was to cast fire on the earth and that fire would cause division, sometimes even among family members. So, the disciples need to be prepared for conflict.

Then (12:54-59) Luke records Jesus' words to the whole multitude, where He chides them for being able to analyze the weather, but they ignore the signs of the times, namely that Messiah is in their very midst.

These words were meant to readjust their lives to what was important. That is, to rearrange their lives to always be seeking what God is up to right here, right now. We look at the rumblings of war, of earthquakes, of hurricanes and wonder if the end times are upon us.

When all the while we are to be looking not there, but at Christ, at the hope he offers, the forgiveness he bears for us and for all people, the promise that his Spirit will roam this earth until Christ himself comes again.

Jesus' words remind us that we need to set fire to the old so that the new can emerge, just like new life emerges from the destruction of a fire.

God's love is often bad news to people of privilege and power because Jesus provides a higher authority than the law of the land or religious practice. For example, Christ's birth was a threat to King Herod's power.

The church's spiritual source of wisdom, without hesitation or apology, asserts that a nation which fuels its economy on greed (that is, at the expense of others' basic needs) is a nation under God's judgment. The sword of divine justice hangs over all of us.

The gospel was compared to fire because it violently changes the face of things. Fire is both a source of destruction and a source of rebirth or new life. Jesus uses the metaphor of fire's destructive power to urge us to follow him and give up our earthly lives.

We are materially rich and spiritually poor. Money has begun to obscure some of our more important values. Society has reached new lows in terms of public morality, whether it be sex scandals or traditional values.

God is with us regardless of what the future brings, but we must regain our connection with Him. We need to focus less on our earthly, material resources for security and more on the Rock of Ages. God carves men and women to be with Him forever.

Choosing to love and follow Jesus will create division and conflict. The sword of division about which Jesus spoke is the result of Christ-like love. To love people as Jesus did is to stand for something. To stand for justice is to stand against injustice. To stand for truth is to oppose hypocrisy and falsehood.

To be a Christian is to love all that Christ loved and to be an enemy of all that crucified him. To follow him is to make enemies. Jesus was awarded a cross, and he bids us to take up our cross and follow him. We all have worth in the eyes of God, regardless of social status, income, etc.

He calls all of us to love each other as he loves us. If we cannot love our neighbor, whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen. Jesus said in Matthew 12:30, "He who is not with me is against me".

Jesus gives us a choice-accept him or reject him. The choice we make has consequences. If we accept him, we risk alienation from friends and family. If we reject him, we face eternal damnation. Either choice causes division-either us from friends and family, or us from God. The disciples also needed God's spiritual fire or else they would die.

They needed the fire of God's word to keep their hearts from freezing over and to keep the passion of their souls from cooling down. We are the same way. We have moments when our faith cools down.

We all need the fire of God's word in our lives, or else we will grow cold. Jesus was worked up because he knew his crucifixion was coming. He had a job to do before and that was to bring the message of God's Kingdom to the people and the people to God's love.

As he was telling the disciples about living their lives in total commitment to God, he realized that his death was drawing near-and this stirred him up to the point where he became like one of the evangelists we see on television. In other words, he literally spoke of the fires of damnation, judgment and spirit.

He brought God's judgment upon the people. He also divided families, communities and nations. What he did then is still happening today. Jesus' demands for total allegiance divided families in his time and can do so today. When he comes to announce the kingdom, there is division because the kingdom requires decision and commitment.

The message of justice and healing was met with hostility. God's way is not easy. Jesus' way and the world's way cannot coexist. It's one or the other. Jesus' baptism was nothing less than his own crucifixion and death. This baptism was baptism by fire. True baptism leads to resurrection, life and peace.

Division and fire are for a season, not for an eternity. The fire of baptism leads to a new life. If we think of Christ as our example, we realize that we need to shape up. We are in desperate need of forgiveness and moral power.

We need the fire of Christ's spirit today. Can we see ourselves as a great cloud of witnesses, willing to run the race that is set before us, following Jesus, who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith? God calls the church to find the anger that lets it know it's still alive.

Too often Christ is left for dead in this cold world. We often become desensitized to many of the things around us. We cannot understand the present time even though Christ is right in front of us.

Some feel that the secular world's issues or the dirty business of politics shouldn't taint the sanctified holy life that we live together as Christians within the church community. That, my friends, is totally untrue.

God's fire forces us to become concerned for social issues and justice. A concern that is contrary to the secular world. Jesus' teachings and actions challenged the status quo, and they still do. Jesus declares war on the world's injustices. The call to follow Christ is a call to relieve and, wherever possible, to remove the causes of suffering. It goes against what the world says is important.

Jesus' fire creates a new life in us that is better than the old one. It will cause conflict with the world and even with those we love, but it is better to be true to yourself rather than to someone else's notion of yourself. We can be fortified to truth, justice and inclusion.

We as Christians attach ourselves to Jesus and the church. It means we belong first to Jesus and second to the world. It means we belong first to the church family and second to the human family. Jesus asks for-no, DEMANDS-this radical commitment is a commitment that seems radical to the world.

It creates conflict, difficulties and struggles that strengthen us for our walk with Jesus and our mission in the world. God will help us overcome the struggles our new life will cause. The fire of the Holy Spirit burns away the dead branches that litter our lives and inhibit our spiritual growth.

It also empowers our joining with Jesus. It is a sign that the church is alive and well, and that the family is adjusting to God's love and God's peace. 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 during the blaze. We are given the opportunity to be enlightened ...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 amid 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.

During a training session for soldiers who were about to make their first parachute jump, the sergeant explained how to open the reserve chute if the main chute didn't open. A private nervously raised his hand and asked, "Sergeant, if my main chute doesn't open, how long do I have to pull my reserve?"

The sergeant looked directly into the young private's eyes and replied earnestly, "The rest of your life, soldier. The rest of your life." (In Reader's Digest, February 1982.)

If you have not trusted in Christ as your only hope for forgiveness on the day of judgment, you are like that soldier plunging toward earth. Either you accept Jesus as your sin bearer and you are reconciled to God; or, you will come into God's court of justice and pay your own debt, which is eternal separation from Him.

How long do you have to get on Jesus' side? The answer is, the rest of your life! It is never too late. Jesus has drawn the line. Will you trust Him now before it is too late? Amen.

Let us pray: Father, we do know that the world cannot offer us peace. They can say, "Peace, " but that peace comes only through Christ. You did bring fire. You did bring division, and for us, the fire purified us, and we are very grateful for your fire on earth. Amen.