

August 18, 2013
Pentecost 13

“Jesus Brings Fire”

LUKE 12:49-53

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, 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 daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

As I am speaking there is violence and bloodshed in Egypt. One news report said the Nile River is running with blood. This is a religious war. Those who want a more modern Egypt are trying to get rid of the Muslim Brotherhood who are pushing for an Islamic controlled government. Not a day goes by without hearing about more bloodshed and bombings fueled by those fighting in the name of Allah.

The other day I was reading a portion of the Old Testament book of Judges for my personal devotions. The people who wanted to follow the true God were in constant conflict with those who wanted to be more open to worship of other gods especially the god Baal.

In the words we just read to you, our Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace, tells us that we should expect conflict to develop in our lives, even in our families, when we follow him closely. There will always be conflict between those who believe they are saved entirely by what Christ has done for them and those who believe they save themselves by what they can do to please God. There is also conflict when close followers of Jesus want to correct those who would dare to teach something other than what God's Word teaches. Let's listen to Jesus as he speaks to us about bringing fire on this earth.

Jesus speaks of the fire that will come to him

“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” Fire is bad when it destroys things that are good. Fire is good when it destroys things that are bad. Jesus is speaking about the fire he would bring to destroy sin. He says, “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed.”

You have heard the expression “baptism by fire.” It is often used to describe a soldier's first experience in actual combat. The new teacher who is thrown into a tough classroom experiences a baptism by fire. Jesus would be baptized or washed with fire as he engages sin at the cross. He says he is distressed until it is completed.

Jesus often thought about the cross and bearing and our sin and being forsaken by his Father for us. How could he not think about the words of Isaiah 53 that would be fulfilled in him: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him

stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."

This past summer 19 firefighters died in Arizona when they were fighting a fast moving fire in the Prescott area. It appears that the sudden shift of wind from developing summer monsoons caught the firemen off guard. They tried to hide underneath protective fire blankets but the fury of the fire was so great they died. I think of how awful it would be to die in such a way. The last sounds to reach their ears were the horrific cries of agony and pain as they died in the flames. As painful as their deaths were, their pain was small compared to the pain Jesus endured at the cross when he became sin for us. The punishment for our peace was upon him. Jesus constantly thought of this baptism by fire that he would endure on the cross for us.

Fire is good when it destroys something that is bad. I recall watching my dad take a torch and burn a wasp nest at night when the wasps were back in their nest. Those nasty wasps were stinging us and making it difficult to be out in the yard playing. How good it was to see them burnt to a crisp the next day. I see Jesus dying on the cross and destroying the sin that would destroy us. I cannot find anything in myself that would destroy even one sin that I have committed this past week. I know my heart and you know your heart. You see where you have failed your God. You know that even your best attempts to get rid of sin cannot destroy and remove one little thing you did wrong. You know that God by his very nature as God must punish all sin. I need the fire that Jesus brought at the cross. It is my only hope of forgiveness and peace with God. It cost him everything, but it cost us nothing.

Because this fire of salvation revealed for us in the Bible is so unique and so distinct it conflicts with all other religions of the world. It conflicts with what I feel in my heart inside of me. It even conflicts with what others believe who are close to me. That may even include members of the family.

Jesus speaks of fire that will come to us

So there is a fire that will come to us. "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. They 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." Jesus speaks of friction in the family between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters and those whom they have married.

You know of families where there is friction between those who don't believe and those who do believe. There is also friction between those who believe Christ has done it all for them and those who believe they can partially believe in Christ and add their good life to what he has done to save us. There is friction between those who believe every word of the Bible is true and those who do not take the Bible all that seriously.

If there is unity in your family or in your extended family because of what you believe about

Jesus, then thank God for that unity. It is truly a wonderful blessing. Psalm 133 says, "How good it is when brothers live together in unity!" If you share a strong commitment to the truths of God's Word with other members of your family, then thank God for that strong commitment. It is a beautiful blessing. Not all families have such blessings. Some endure division over Jesus and his Word.

There was no surprise for Jesus when he went to the cross. He knew the fire of pain and suffering waiting for him. There is no surprise for those who are faithful to the cross of Jesus. People will look at you differently for your strong convictions on how you are saved even people in your own family. That is part of the price for being a Christian. Jesus never said, "Take up your pillow and follow me." Jesus did say, "Take up your cross and follow me." Jesus tells us this morning "I have come to bring fire on this earth." For those who don't believe in Jesus the preaching of the cross is absolute foolishness and nonsense. For us who believe it is our only hope of being saved.

To illustrate why this conflict exists, let me ask you what happens when you try to take a bone away from a dog. If the dog is your close friend, it may let you take the bone away from it. If you are a stranger you risk getting your hand bitten. When the message of the gospel comes into the lives of people it takes away the false hope that people have in themselves. They do not always appreciate such a message. In fact they may attack you for daring to telling them that everything they believe in is not true. Jesus words "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." Such an exclusive statement riles up those who want all religions to have equal access to God.

During the LA riots, a tearful Rodney King made national news with his plaintive cry, "Can't we all just get along." Our government leaders are disappointed with the Egyptian people who promised to try and get along with each other and now they are fighting. And so it is in the church in these last days. Huge efforts are made to just get along and not be so testy when it comes to believing the full gospel or the full truth of God's Word. What would Jesus have us do? Does he want us to keep silent and not say anything? Does he want us to join the crowd who says, "There are two things I never discuss, politics and religion?"

In our Old Testament lesson for today the Lord speaks these words through the prophet Jeremiah. "Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" The Lord does not want us to be like a dishonest farmer who adds straw to the grain. He does not want us to add our opinions to his Word. He wants us to proclaim his Word faithfully. Earlier in this chapter Jesus warned against the yeast of the scribes and Pharisees. It does not take long for a little bit of yeast to multiply and permeate the whole batch of dough. Tolerate false teaching in the church and it is not long before the only fire that destroys sin, Jesus our Savior, is lost. Any attempt to supplement what Christ has done will ultimately supplant what Christ has done.

John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. You are a Christian who wants to follow Jesus closely. You believe you are saved entirely by what Christ has done without adding to what he has done for you. You represent this to the world. You are the salt of this earth and the light of the world. Jesus has given you the Holy Spirit who will lead you to witness to your faith. Along with this witness to your faith comes the baptism of fire and with this baptism of fire comes even greater strength

to witness to what we believe.

On any given Sunday only 20 percent of the people living in this country are found in worship. I know there are people in China and India who need to hear what Jesus has done for them. There are people right here, even in our own families, who need the clear proclamation that Jesus is the fire that destroys sin and saves us. Jesus said, "I have come to bring fire on this earth." The firestorm Jesus unleashed at the cross has done its job. The fire of the gospel that goes out into the world is still finding its way on the lips of people all over the world. May the Lord grant us his Holy Spirit to be on fire for him. Amen.