

Fire, Death, Division

Let's do a little Bible study on a couple of this morning's readings. We'll look at the gospel reading from Luke first. Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12.49) What do you suppose He meant? Fire on the earth usually means destruction to us, especially to Southern Californians who live daily with the threat of wildfires.

So what does Jesus mean? Is He bringing raging destruction to the earth, to your life and mine? I think the answer is yes and no, with the ultimate balance to our benefit, as it always is with God. So Jesus brings fire. What kind of fire and what does it do?

The first kind that should come to mind for any Christian is the fire of the Holy Spirit. Remember Pentecost? "When the day of Pentecost had come, [the disciples] were all together in one place.... Divided tongues, *as of fire*, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit..." (Acts 2.1-4) So Jesus' fire is the Holy Spirit, a thought which should both comfort and disconcert us – comfort because all that follows is from the God who passionately loves us, disconcert because what this God does with us is sometimes disquieting and even painful, though it is always for our good.

Well, what does this fire of God's Spirit do? The first thing that fire does is warm and light. Think of our prehistoric ancestors huddled around a campfire, whose flickering light pushes back the night's darkness and the dangers that darkness hides, whose warmth makes life possible. Fire changes things; it anneals or hardens metals, rocks, and clay, and it makes the nutrients of some inedible foods available for digestion. Fire transmutes complex compounds to simpler compounds or elements – carbon, nitrogen, water. Fire purifies what we value from what is not useful, as one refines gold or silver or other metals (1 Peter 1.7). So we can see by analogy that God's Spirit illuminates our darkness, reduces the dangers we face, warms our lives with grace that makes us whole and well, anneals our souls to do the work of loving our neighbor and our world, reduces complexities to simpler relationships that we can use for love, creativity, and beauty, purifies our thoughts and actions from the dross of selfishness to the pure gold of love.

Saint Paul write in his first letter to the Corinthians of a special case of purifying fire. On the Day of Judgment purifying fire will reveal the relative worth of human life. Paul writes "the work of each builder will become visible... because it will be revealed with fire... the builder will be saved but only as through fire." (1 Cor 3.13, 15; also 3.10-15) Our souls will be purified with spiritual fire, which may be painful in some fashion, but what we will ultimately be is far more valuable than anything we could ever have imagined.

Jesus goes on in our reading to say, “I have a baptism with which to be baptized...” (12.50) We know that Jesus was referring to His death in Jerusalem (Mark 10.38). Death as baptism – Jesus thought of death this way and so did His devoted follower, Saint Paul. Paul writes in *Romans*, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (6.3-4) We see death stalking the servants of God. We read death in the Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah, the fate of John the Baptist, the growing opposition to Jesus from those who do not understand His teaching. Jesus’ death and resurrection will bring the fire of decision to human beings, decision for or against or indifference to God’s work in the Messiah. Universally feared death is transformed by Jesus into living baptismal waters of life. The terror of death has been tamed by the grace of God.

Jesus goes on to say something even more difficult, I think, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” (12.51) We usually think of division as negative, something destructive. But division can be constructive. We divide ourselves with God’s grace from what is destructive, from our earlier life of selfishness, the attempt to live for ourself alone, without reference to God. It is the essential journey from self-centeredness to other-centeredness, especially God-centeredness. It is division *from* but it is also division *to*, to the new life of commitment to God, to God as revealed in the Messiah, the Christ, the Nazareth Carpenter Jesus. This division is decision, a decision for or against God enfleshed in our world.

Let’s take a moment to look at the reading from *Hebrews*: “...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,...” (12.1) This division, this decision, this baptism, this death, this fire in the bone – is a process, a dynamic working-out, rather than a one-time event. It is a race requiring perseverance. We have help in that race: Witnesses, or what we might call spectators, to cheer us on in these Olympic Games of Life. They are spectators who are also participants, who have run the race before us, who have won their medals, who are now rooting for us. These witnesses are the saints. We also have the help of those who are *now* running with us, our friends, our companions, you and me together, witnesses within the race, real encouragers. And there is Jesus, who has also run the race before us, who has endured the cross, who has endured the shame, the hostility of humankind toward God’s work in Himself. He has won the race, He has conquered, now He is with His Father in heaven, with our Father in heaven. He is our constant encouragement, for no matter how we suffer, He has suffered first and suffered most. Completely innocent, He passed through the fire of judgment for us and He passes through our fire of judgment *with* us. Now he disciplines us with fire, too, the fire that He brings to earth, the fire to purify the earth. Just as a parent disciplines a child so that the daughter or son might learn wisdom; just as a goldsmith fires the gold to remove its impurities; just as clay must be fired to gain the strength and beauty of pottery; just so does God cast the fire of His Word, the fire of His love, the fire of His discipline, the fire of His Spirit, upon us.

Jesus Christ the Son of God came to cast fire upon the earth, to set the world aflame, not with a consuming firestorm of rejection and exclusion, but with a passionate desire to make all things new, all people perfect, all persons loved, all humans loving, all races complete, burning forever with the fire of God's incredible love. Jesus came to cast that fire of love upon the earth.

Let us then rejoice in the strength of that divine, flaming love, the fire that purifies us, the fire that inspires us, the fire that warms us into "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord," as *Hebrews* goes on to say (12.14).

Come, fire, Come, division. Come, death. Come, Spirit. Come, love. Come, Lord Jesus.

In closing, let us pray for those who shall choose a rector for this parish: Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a rector for this parish, that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.