

10th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.14.22

Luke 12:49-56

“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?”

Mood matching can be a problem within a couple. I seem to remember hearing that somewhere. A bit of pop-psychology, mood-matching is when two people in a close relationship are, or aren't, in the same mood or open to adopting the same mood.

A quick Google search suggests a parent should avoid mood-matching with a moody child, should instead retain a calm, steady state. But partners *should* aim to match moods with one another, or at least should be able to recognize when a clash in relating is simply a matter of being in a different mood from one another.

Mood matching: it's always a problem this time of year when it comes to church, when we the congregants are in lilting August and Jesus our Christ is increasingly sharp tongued, when we're thinking Tanglewood lawn and he's thinking kindling fire. Come on. Especially in this year, Year C, it's a problem.

Year C is when we follow the Gospel of Luke. In Year A, it's Matthew. In Year B, it's Mark. In Year C, it's Luke, the sharpest gospel narrative. Jesus tells some very pointed parables in this gospel, and he acts in quite reactive ways. I've even heard teachers of homiletics, that is teachers of preaching, urge the preacher to remember the loveliness of so much of Luke—and right from the start with angels and shepherds and a baby in a manger—for when the going gets tough, for it will indeed get tough, and always in August, and into September.

We've been studying it. In book club on Monday evenings, we've read several books now on the literature of Luke, which is to say the Gospel of Luke and the Books of Acts. Our study has brought home to me several important points. One of them is that this is a piece of literature in the nearly modern sense, with literary integrity, unlike most of what you find in the Bible. With

“Luke” we really are dealing with a writer, and one who has created a piece with these not-supposed-to-be-separate books, Luke and Acts, often even separated in name with just a hyphen: Luke-Acts.

The Gospel of Luke has as its main figure Jesus under the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit, and the Book of Acts has as its main character the early church under the guidance and influence of that same Holy Spirit, which comes most profoundly into the world to birth the church as tongues of flame.

Remember? Tongues of flame? When the apostles were all gathered in one room, following Jesus’ crucifixion and his resurrection and at last his ascension, and they were all gathered in grief and waiting for whatever might come next, what came next was the Holy Spirit arrived among them as a thunderous wind and tongues of flame, a tongue resting on each of these and giving them the ability to communicate across language divides as everyone gathered in the crowded city that day, Jerusalem, had come from every nation and every people, foreign tongues all around and now yet intelligible, true communication, true communion, as if all of one tongue, as if those tongues of flames welded, melded.

Fire. It can go lots of ways with this elemental thing, fire.

It’s literature, these two books, taken together a piece of literature—which isn’t to say that it’s not also the gospel truth. It’s just to say that the writer of these companion books took the raw material of the stories of Jesus and of the early church, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and was able to make of them a literary work, that is a work rooted in the word. *Lit*: the word.

It’s easy to hear the label “literature” as evaluative rather than simply descriptive. Like, a book is “literature” when it’s good and not literature when it’s not so “good,” same way a movie is a film if it’s good, ideally in a foreign language with subtitles and all. But I don’t mean to distinguish between “good” and “less good.” This isn’t a qualitative matter; it’s a matter of form and function. I mean to point to how you interact with a written text.

With many stories, it’s more about plot than about the words the writer’s chosen. Stephen King is a great writer of gripping stories. But his isn’t literature in that not much is gained for paying close attention the words he uses to tell his story, and the nuanced images they evoke. With Fitzgerald, though, or O’Connor or Ellison, you have to pay attention to the words, you gain so much for paying attention to the words.

Fire. Luke does a lot with it.

And it sounds scary, this text. It sounds scary, this Jesus. We hear this talk of fire, and it sounds threatening—threatening of pain and punishment, threatening of torment for torment’s sake. Talk of fire like this always has images of hellfire just a few steps behind. Even for those of us raised in churches that had little need for the notion of hell, even for those of us who are unabashedly universalist in their understanding of what salvation is and what the power of Christ to redeem is: we can’t help but to think in terms of hellfire, torment, fire as frightening.

And I wonder sometimes if this is the line of thinking Luke expects his readers to go down—Luke who plays a lot in terms of fire, and is perhaps asking us to hear it as scary in a different way, a more subtle way, an even sustaining way.

Remember that early time we meet God, in a bush that burned though was never consumed. Sustained and sustaining fire.

Remember that as God.

Remember also that the voice from that bush named God-self as YHWH, the sound of breath, a name for being, a name that *means* being: “I AM.”

The first we hear mention of fire in Luke, our writer puts it on John’s lips, John the baptizer who was also Jesus’ cousin. He, according to Luke, was quite clear about what Jesus would bring, though his notion wasn’t necessarily born out. He promised one who was coming who would bring a baptism of fire, who would clear the threshing floor and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. I wonder, though, if he understood unquenchable fire as something of hell, torment, unending torment, or something of God, being, dynamic being.

I wonder. I really don’t know. But I think Luke has some idea. He’s bringing us on a journey, a journey of redemption, and one of the things to be redeemed is the whole notion of what fire can do, what it is for, and who God is in the world. Redeeming. Refining. Not punishing. Not punishing.

So, another thing Luke might mean to be redeemed is our theology, our thinking about God and what God is about. Repentance is, after all, a change in mind. Luke means to change our minds, our minds about God.

John was ready for a Christ who wouldn’t be wasting any time in setting things to right, or what one person might consider right.

Next time we hear of fire, though, Jesus doesn’t seem all that interested. It was when the disciples had gone ahead to a Samaritan village to find the people there unwilling to receive Jesus and his caravan as guests. Jesus had just set his face to Jerusalem, had just decided it was now to

Jerusalem that he would determinedly wander. And he'd send apostles ahead of him to scout out places where he'd settle in for a time before setting out again. But this Samaritan village wouldn't receive them, wouldn't show them the hospitality that was the high standard of the day. So, the disciples James and John asked Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" to which Jesus rebuked them and simply guided them on to another village.

Next comes this time, which we just heard, Jesus speaking of a fire he wished were kindled already. And it falls in the middle of the book. It would be the element of the baptism of which Jesus speaks, and it would be divisive, the sort of thing that draws a line, on which people would find themselves on one side or the other. This line would be decisive and as such would be divisive. Are you in or are you out? Are you coming or are you staying? When it comes to this movement, when it comes to this new politics whose organizing principle for gathering people into functioning groups is love, when it comes to this new politics whose organizing principal is love and whose power for gathering in a dynamic of peace is the Holy Spirit of love and truth: are you in or are you out?

Which is it?

Which? Seriously. 'Cuz we gotta go. The world can't stand to wait any longer. It will devour itself. It will lose itself to unending violence, vengeance seeking vengeance. We don't time. We don't have that kind of time. So, which is it?

As for what might happen to everyone after they choose, as to what might happen to those on either side of this line, who would suffer a fire come down from heaven to consume them: it might well be those who choose to come along, those who choose to join us. Beware, those of you in the pews. Be aware those who have come along with the church. This fire might be for you.

The final time. The final time fire is mentioned in this gospel, it truly is threatening, though not as we might at first have feared. Jesus has been arrested and is on trial in Pontius Pilate's chambers. Peter has taken up watch in the courtyard outside. A small fire has been built and people are gathered around it and "when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them."

Peter, who had been Jesus' most present disciple.

Peter, who was the one first to recognize of Jesus and confess: "You are the Messiah."

Peter, who was the one'd have been eager to defend Jesus from being crucified: "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you!"

Peter, whom Jesus had recognized as still setting his mind on human things (Defend yourself! Defend at all costs!) rather than on divine things (Give of yourself. *Forgive even.*) And Peter on whom would be built the whole church, Peter whose apostleship would prove essential to the success of this whole thing.

That Peter?

Something must have changed with that Peter, then.

“A servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, ‘This man also was with him.’”

This is the first time Peter’s had the chance to decide, whether he’d be identified as someone who knew the arrested one, the soon-to-be-crucified one. This is the first time Peter really had the chance to decide whether he was with Jesus or not, whether he was joining up with this politics of love, love whatever the cost, or not?

See, last time he decided to join up with Jesus, see, he didn’t have all the facts. He thought he was going along with the Messiah who would change the world in all the normal ways. He’d burn up the bad people and gather in all the good. Now he realized it was something else altogether. Jesus would be a way for bad people to be gathered in as good—for we’re all bad and we’re all good. We just need to be given the chance. And then maybe again another chance. And, probably again another chance.

(Don’t give up on us.)

The fire revealed the truth. The servant-girl clearly saw it. Peter was with Jesus.

But was he?

“Woman,” Peter said to the girl, “I do not know him.”

He’d be given another chance—and he would deny him again.

He’d be given another chance—and he would deny him again.

Turns out, it’s tough to join up with this politics of love when it’s *your* life on the line. We wouldn’t know. It’s always been fairly easy for the likes of us, American Christians, Christians of the Modern West, to make our confession. We’re so far removed from the true costs of our decision. We’re so far abstracted from the true costs of our discipleship. That’s the whole point of civilization: to keep at safe distance the inherent violence of life in the world, which means it’s a strange blessing, this civilization for those of us on the top though who would really love a politics more immediate than that, who would really love a politics of love.

We toy with the tearing and rending of civilization at our own peril.

That said, there might be some salvation in it too.

Mood-matching: have I brought you down? If so, blame Jesus. He did it.

Really, it's why we crucified him.

Here's Matt Skinner, a Bible scholar specializing in Luke-Acts: "The fire Jesus wants to kindle is a fire of change, the fire of God's active presence in the world. No wonder he is so eager to strike the match." Here also: "Fire is, after all, about refining. And refining hurts, especially for those of us who have a lot of impurities sticking to us."

I'd add that fire brings light to what has been in darkness. It's revealing, and there's a lot about us we'd prefer to have hidden, to have unseen. That darn servant girl. The servants see a lot. The slaves see a lot.

We're allowed to have this lovely, lilting August day. We're allowed to have this lovely day.

Live into it, lovely people gathered here.

But, also work that others might live into this lovely sort of day.

Live into it that all creation might be free to revel in its abounding loveliness.

Let yourself be changed by love. It might hurt—for there is much about us all that isn't love. Fear this change, but only as evidence that there's a lot not of God about you.

For there is far more of God about you, all about you. The fire of the Holy Spirit will reveal such things. The warming, sustaining fire of the church shall reveal such things. If you fear anything, fear what you'll be freed of to let go.

And then let it go.

Thanks be to God.