

Luke 12:49–56

49 (Jesus said to his disciples,) “I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint 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?¹

Heavenfire

Quick question for you: why do you think Jesus came into the world? Imagine I had asked you this question, say, twenty minutes ago. How many of you would have said, “Oh, that’s easy! Jesus came into the world to bring fire upon it and cause division!” Quick show of hands? ... I didn’t think so. In today’s world full of division, it seems like the last thing that we should want from anything, but especially our faith, is further division. But, on its face, this is exactly what Jesus says he’s here for in this morning’s scripture. To be sure, he isn’t holding anything back in these verses. Let’s talk about that.

For context, this lecture (or perhaps rant) of Jesus’s that we’ve read today comes as part of a longer teaching to his disciples and to some crowds that have gathered, alternating back and forth between the two audiences. He begins by speaking with his disciples, until a person in the crowd pipes up and asks him to resolve a dispute over an inheritance. He then turns back to his disciples, which is who he’s addressing as our passage begins this morning. Around verse 54, though, he shifts his attention back to the crowd. So already, in this morning’s little snapshot of scripture, Jesus is managing two groups.

In fact, just before he started teaching his disciples, he’d had dinner with a Pharisee, instructed him in the proper ways of the law (which is to say, denounced them and their self-entitled “expertise” in the law), and then went back outside. The Pharisees and the scribes began

¹Luke 12:49-56, NRSVue.

to interrogate him, hoping to catch him in a trap.² What we see now is implied to be either during or immediately after this interrogation.³

Jesus begins this chapter of Luke with an exhortation to his disciples about fearless confession. He turns his attention to someone in the crowd who asked for help with his inheritance, and urges the crowds and his disciples to both take care of God's land, and entrust their care to God. (This is actually where the popular "consider the lilies" verse comes from. Now, we don't have time to unpack all of that this morning, but that's a different sermon for a different day.) Immediately before his talk of the fire that's to come to earth, and the division that will happen in his name, Jesus warns his disciples to remain watchful and faithful to God. (Where have we heard that before?...)

Then, Jesus says, a fire is coming. Fire. And not only that, but he wishes that it were already blazing. I don't know about you, but if Jesus had asked me if I thought he had come to bring peace, I would have answered... yes? Absolutely! He is, after all, the Prince of Peace; the angels sang of the peace that he would bring at his birth, even in this same gospel of Luke!⁴ He was prophesied to "guide our feet into the ways of peace,"⁵ so what could he mean by this fire? And further, that more division will come as a result of his mission?

The language of "fire" is very striking. It immediately conjures an image in each of our heads, of destruction, or armageddon, vengeance, perhaps even judgment? It's easy to interpret this as God being more than ready to smite. It's easy, even, to read that this is Jesus saying that he's ready to judge the world and all of us sinners in the fire that he's come to set. But, this is not the Jesus that I know. Nor is this the Messiah that Jesus claims to be; the Gospel of John says that Christ did not come to condemn the world, but that through him, the world might be saved.⁶ And, fire is not always portrayed as a destructive force, even in the Bible. God first appeared to Moses as a burning bush. Chariots of fire came and took Elijah up to heaven. And now, Jesus is coming with a fire of purification and refinement. Luke affirms this in chapter 3 of his gospel.⁷ This is not hellfire. This is *heavenfire*.

With that refinement, Jesus comes with the goal of making the world a better place. When metal needs to be refined, this is done by setting it in a bright, hot fire. This burns off the impurities of the metal, and it brings something far better, more pure, and more attractive to buyers and craftsmen alike. It hurts to touch it, absolutely, and if we are being refined, it is certainly a painful process. But it's done in a fire of change. No wonder that Jesus is so eager to strike the match; he yearns for the kingdom of God to come to the world,⁸ to break forth in all of its fullness. He longs for the world to be changed through him. The transformation that Luke envisions here are the things that Jesus wants, too.

² Luke 11:53-54.

³ 12:1.

⁴ 2:14.

⁵ 1:79.

⁶ John 3:17.

⁷ Luke 3:16-17; cf. Malachi 3:1-3.

⁸ John 3:3-14.

Baptism, then, is an interesting counterpoint to the fire that he claims to be bringing. Baptism is almost the exact opposite of a fire in some ways: it involves water, it is a balm for the soul. It is an adoption of the life of Christ. Even now, we think of baptism as the acceptance of the Holy Spirit, and the acknowledgement of a God that has already chosen us. I'm trying to say that it's hard, for me at least, to read "fire" and "baptism" and think that they have much in common at all.

But again, this fire of refinement is also one that leads to a kind of death. If we mistake the impurities of the world for purity, which we so often do, we resist Jesus. We don't want to be refined. Like I said, it's hot, and it hurts, especially if we have a lot of things that need to be burned away. And, if we are baptised in life and in death with Christ, then to Christ, baptism is also a kind of death. It's not simply a joyous, easy occasion, even for us. It's a promise for us, and death for Christ as it leads to the cross. It's how God calls and claims us, and how we answer that call. When Jesus juxtaposes this fire of refinement with the yoke of baptism, suddenly we get a much clearer picture of how Jesus calls us, and how we fit into this fire.

Throughout his teachings and parables and lectures on this particular day in Palestine, Jesus is warning against hypocrisy, which he warns against in the first sentence of his lecture in Luke 12:1, and which he cries out against in the final verses that we read this morning. His use of the word, "hypocrites," though, is interesting. A very similar warning, even down to the meteorological metaphors, occurs in the gospel of Matthew.⁹ Luke, though, adds the charge of hypocrisy. Now, to me, this feels a bit strange. It feels a bit out of character. Calling them "hypocrites" implies that they *know how* to interpret the signs, but choose not to. Jesus, though, very explicitly says that they *don't know* how to interpret the signs of the times.

The Greek word *ὑποκριτής* (*hypocritēs*) can mean several things. It can, of course, mean a pretender, a fraud, or one who says one thing when they mean another. It can also mean one who *interprets*, or even an *actor* or a *stage player*.¹⁰ The hypocrites that Jesus is denouncing, absolutely can refer to those who lie: for example, the Pharisees and scribes and all others who claim to know the law but choose to either ignore or interpret it in a way that benefits them instead of society. In light of the other meanings of the word, maybe it also refers to those who claim to know how to interpret the signs of the sociopolitical climate, but who really have no idea what's going on.

Despite all of the richness of the rest of this passage—or indeed, because of it—the accusation of hypocrisy is the part that sticks with me the most. It refers, most obviously, to those people who can read the signs, but can't see the writing on the wall. They can know what's coming, but can't figure out "the present time." In other words, the hypocrites are those who claim to know, but who really don't know anything about what's already at hand. This isn't really hypocrisy as we know it, though. It sounds more like simple "bad vision." Maybe the scribes and the Pharisees, and the crowds that they were a part of, just needed to visit the optometrist.

⁹ Matthew 16:2-3.

¹⁰ Blue Letter Bible, "ὑποκριτής," <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5273/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

The label of hypocrite, though, makes more sense if we consider *what* a hypocrite is and *how* they might be hypocritical. Perhaps a hypocrite is someone who believes that Jesus brings grace, but continues to work under the law to achieve their own righteousness. Perhaps it's someone who thinks they have everything figured out, but keeps using human action to remain in control. Perhaps, a hypocrite is one who claims to understand that Jesus actually did come just to bring peace, and we don't need all of this fire that he claims to bring, thank you very much; we're just fine as we are.

But the hypocrites there (and if we're being honest, here today, too—I can certainly be that kind of hypocrite that Jesus is speaking against) need to consider what Jesus is doing as they live their lives. How is it that they, and we, can be at once so wise to the world and so ignorant of God at work in it? As we live in the church, how can we continue to hear and heed God's call? In the light of the fire that burns in us and the world, the fire that the world seems to want to put out, we would be wise to take a look at ourselves as we look at who Jesus calls "hypocrites." All have fallen short of the glory of God, but it is precisely by the love of God in Christ that we are able to try again. In baptism, we are given this gift. But we also must realize that we can't only see and hear what we want to. Christ calls us to more. We must be unafraid of showing the world who we are: in love, respect, and hope that the future would be made better and clearer by God in each of us.

I think we've well established that Jesus clearly isn't against peace, even if he will bring division. Jesus affirms elsewhere in the gospels, that he did, in fact come to ultimately bring peace. He points out that, though, that his message of release and transformation, of purification and fire, of baptism and death and new life, is bound to be divisive. The peace that he came to bring is not a false peace. It is not a shallow peace. It is not a peace that aims to keep everyone calm, quiet, and numb to the realities of the world. I would say that this kind of peace, actually puts out the fire that Jesus set in our hearts. Jesus wants more for us and for the world.

We tend to think that the world divides us, and our faith unites us. Often, this is true; despite any disagreements that come up, I feel that we can generally come together over our faith in God. But, followers of Jesus are supposed to live like Jesus. This means that sometimes, we will be called to live in such a way that people around us resist what we are trying to do. Sometimes we, ourselves, are called to live in a way that resists the popular movements of the world. Following Jesus will get us into trouble sometimes.

Lest we forget, Jesus came not just to die for the world, but to change the world. If his mission was simply peace, without any possibility of division, then he would never have been killed. The world would never be changed. If the mission of the church was simply peace, without division, then the church would not have stood up against some of the most heinous crimes against humanity that we've seen.

I understand that Mary went over some of our confessions with you all a few weeks ago. (I hope you were paying attention!) I'm a big fan of our confessions, and in a lot of them, they show exactly how the collective church has lived into their, our, faith. In 1933, members of the Reformed Church in Germany wrote and signed the Declaration of Barmen, which renounced Nazism in Germany, and anywhere else the world. It signified that the church could not in good

conscience sit idly by and support, passively or otherwise, the actions of the Nazi regime. Later, in 1982, during the South African apartheid, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (the church for people of color under apartheid) wrote the Declaration of Belhar, formally denouncing apartheid and the racism that led to it as distinctly unchristian and un-Christlike.

In both of these instances, the church was involved with a mission of peace that, in the immediate sense, sowed division. Even if the efforts of those people who wrote these confessions were to refine the church, they did divide it. Again, if their only concern was peace, then the church would have done things to keep that false, fragile peace. But the fire of Christ burned stronger than any desire to be silent. The fires that Christ came to set burned through the church, through the people of God whom God made and whom God loves, and it devoured that false peace. Through the refinement of the fire of the Lord, our church, along with its members, is made stronger, if we are only open to it. The world is made a better place through us, if we can only tend to that flame in our hearts and in one another.

Jesus speaks in Luke of repentance as a changed mind.¹¹ It is what happens when we look at ourselves and our world from God's perspective: seeing the presence, handiwork, and love of God in all that God made and called good. Though it may look a bit different than it did 2000 years ago, this is the same world that Christ came to set on fire.

The fire that Jesus came to bring to the earth is one that refines. It's a fire that burns within our hearts, with and for the love of God. It's one that he came to set within each of us, and it's a fire that we must not let the world put out. It is a fire that leads to a deeper love, a clearer sense of where and how God works in the world, and indeed, a greater peace in each of us than we could find anywhere else in the world. And, we should do our best to spread it, through our words, and through our deeds, until the whole world is on fire for Christ, and until the whole world is made new.

We share this love with the rest of the world by the grace of Christ. And they will know that we are Christians by our love, which will shine through the darkness like a candle in the night. May it always burn within us, as we walk with the Spirit of the Lord in pursuit of the things that make way for peace. No matter how the road may look; no matter where the work takes us in the midst of divisions, we can be assured that we're following Christ, the one who knows the way.

For the glory of God. Amen.

¹¹ Cf. Luke 13:1-9.