

Script/ counterscript...Life powered by God the Holy Spirit
Luke 12.49-59

“I came to bring fire to the earth.... You think I came to bring peace? No, I came to bring division!”

This doesn't sound like the loving, healing, gracious Jesus that we usually talk about, does it? Jesus here sounds unreasonable and antagonist. This has been one of those passages that I've stayed away from because these words sound too much like the hellfire preachers of my adolescence...and God knows, we don't need any more of this harsh judgment in the world, even if it *is* coming from Jesus!

But when I read these words last week, I heard something else. Reading this passage through the lens of the Holy Spirit, with the voice of Willie James Jennings and his Act commentary in my ears, these words sounded different. For the first time, I heard something else. When we hear these words from the vantage point of Pentecost, we can hear Jesus' deep desire for the reality of Pentecost. Rather than judgment, Jesus' words express his longing for the fire of the Holy Spirit to blow and burn in the world.

But, just as we would rather Jesus to always be gentle and assuring, I think we have that same expectation of the Holy Spirit. While we know, at least in our heads, that the Spirit descended as fire, burning on each apostle, I wonder if we don't think of the flame as the flame of a candle rather than flames that aren't contained but that burn and spread out outside of a container and borders and boundaries.

We want the part of the Holy Spirit that defends and comforts us, that protects us and fills us with God's love. But fire?! Real fire that burns? Heat and flames that turn some things into ashes? How is such a fire part of a God-who-is-love? How is a fire that destroys the family consistent with a gracious, forgiving, and reconciling God?

Let's return to the Book and Acts and the Pentecost story to see if we can begin to hear some Good News in Jesus' words. Of course, even if we hear Good News, it will certainly also be *hard* news.

Before the day of Pentecost, the apostles were waiting. Jesus had ascended into heaven, telling them to wait for the Spirit to descend. The Spirit would give them the power and capacity to do the things that he had done...and more. And then, one day when they were all at home, the Fire of God blew into their house and landed on each of their heads. The tongues of fire brought new tongues for language. And they now had a new capacity for hearing and understanding other languages. The Fire of God burned away the division and separation that foreign languages cause.

The story makes it sound like all this happened in a moment, and that it was effortless and painless on the part of the apostles. The storyteller doesn't say so, but we can be sure that when the Holy Spirit burned in that house, it was hot. And we can be sure that there were things that turned to ashes so that they would have the capacity for understanding new and other languages. The work of the Spirit in the apostles wasn't without effort and pain. But the disciples could bear it because they were witnesses for Jesus. They knew and trusted that the Spirit of God is a Spirit of resurrection, life, and aliveness.

And with this new capacity for language, for hearing and understanding, the apostles were charged to go to other nations and be Jesus' witnesses. Witnesses to the liberating and healing and saving power they had experienced with Jesus. The same power they now shared. Jennings, we recall, talked about this as a revolution, a revolution that ended nationalism and began building the Reign of God.

Let's listen again to Jesus' words in Luke: "I came to bring fire.... You think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I came to bring division!"

With the Fire of the Spirit, the apostles were free to travel into other nations, no longer limited or bound by the borders and boundaries of nationalism. In our time, it's easy to think of nations as countries with geographical borders. But in a time when people moved around on foot, nations were defined by social groups of people, tribes; people who belonged to each other through time; who had lived together for generations and generations in particular geographical spaces; people who shared a common cult and culture, common clothing and foods, common lifestyles and laws—an ethnicity.

Through time, these social groups have become what we now know as nation states. And while there are practical and good things about being part of a nation, nations can also be oppressive and confining. And we are living in a time when the call to nationalism is rising. We are seeing what happens when concern and care is first of all for *us*, for people who share our ethnicity and race. And the disdain and dehumanization of *them*, of people from other races, ethnicities, and nations.

It is this blind loyalty to *my* nation, to *us* that Jesus is talking about. He is not talking about dividing particular family units; he's talking about burning down the border walls that keep *us* inside and safe and keep *them* out no matter what. Jesus is talking about burning the cages and detention centers that *we* have built because of a blind belief that *we*...that “our kind” matter...but *they*, “their kind” are dangerous and don't matter. Even if they are suffering and dying.

This is so wrong and so unacceptable. We understand the stress this causes Jesus because we too experience stress. We too long for the Fire of God to be kindled already so these walls will be burned to ashes. With Jesus, we too await the day when the political alliances and dynasties that have been created and passed on through family lineages and

marriage are destroyed. With Jesus, we long for the Fire of the Holy Spirit to burn down dominating and oppressive systems so that the Kingdom of God can grow and flourish.

The Good News is that the Fire of the Holy Spirit is already burning. The Spirit is already burning down the boundaries of nationalism. And from the ashes, She is breathing new life, with a common desire and a common language for love and justice and thriving for all bodies. For every body. We can see this happening. All around us, because borders and boundaries have been burned by the Spirit, we can now *see* each other. We can see the common humanity of the other. But there is a cost. When people choose to treat the *other*, the foreigner, the undocumented with the same love and justice that are given to those in our nation, it causes fear to rise in other people, creating new divisions and separations, and new alliances.

Not only does Jesus long for the Fire of the Spirit to breathe and burn, but he also longs for us to *see* and understand what is happening around us. “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the time?” he asks. If we don’t learn to read our times, if we don’t learn to look and see and understand what is happening in our world, we’ll keep repeating the patterns of violence and injustice that have been in place since the beginning of time.

My sense is that we here this morning, we do *see*. Yes, we *want* the Spirit of God to bind us into one Body, one Humanity. We want justice and thriving for all, so we pray, “Fire of God, burn down the border walls and detention centers!” But there are other borders that are harder for us to see. That are much closer to us than the southern border. And Jesus’ words beg us to *see* and interpret our times in the places we inhabit. His words plead with us to *see* what is right and what is wrong, rather than waiting for someone else to tell us. And as we look, we see the walls of *isms*—the walls built with racism and sexism, patriarchy, anti-

Semitism, militarism, imperialism, colonialism, individualism. And the wall *whiteness*. For us, at least for me, this wall is woven into me and so much harder to see. And because it's so close to me, when the Fire of God burns, I *will* be touched by the flames. And there will be ashes.

Whiteness is the way of thinking and being in the world that assumes that white skinned ways of being and thinking are better, superior. It isn't a new way of thinking and being, but *whiteness* is the expression and sign in our present time. And we must learn to understand and interpret it. Whiteness holds power in our world, a power that runs deep within the scripts that have written mass incarceration. Whiteness has scripted policing and the military industrial complex. Whiteness scripted colonization and slavery and the Doctrine of Discovery. And we who are white *have* this power. Not because we've asked for it but because it's given to us by the color of our skin.

We move around in our lives and in our communities with this power. Jesus' words compel us to *see* this power at work in our lives, especially in our relationships with those of other races and ethnicities. And once we've seen the seductive power of whiteness within ourselves, Jesus prays for us to let the Fire of God's Spirit breath and burn. This means that, as a white woman, I will be asked to surrender this unholy power. To give it up. To let God's Spirit burn it to ashes. So that from the ashes we can live in a world where power is truly shared. And for all the world, this will feel like losing. But we can bear it. We can bear it because we worship a God who surrendered heaven to become human. So we let the Spirit of God blow and breathe and burn within us. And we wait and watch as, through time, one humanity rises up in the resurrection garden. A new humanity where *all* bodies thrive, and *every* body has equal and equitable access to power and life and aliveness.

There's another thing that Jesus longs to have the Spirit kindle and burn, that he asks us to see as we interpret the signs of the time: "When you go with your adversary to the magistrate, make every effort along the way to settle, lest your accuser drag you to the judge and the judge deliver you to the officer and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you shall not depart from there till you have paid the very last penny."

This boundary that Jesus is pointing us to is much more elusive. It's easy to see the borders and walls of nationalism, or of racism, or patriarchy. The *us* and *them* is easy enough to identify. But when the Holy Spirit of God is blowing and burning and bringing new life in the world, one of the things we see happening is new *us-es* and new *them-s* being formed. We may no longer be bound by the borders of our nation, or by ethnicity or whatever groups we identify with, but we see new alliances emerging. There is now the *us* who are on the right side of an issue and the *them* who are on the wrong side. The *us* who are working for justice and the *them* who are perpetuating injustice. *We* who are working for peace and *they* who are doing violence. These new oppositional and divisive borders are the work of the accuser. Satan, the adversary, is forever whispering into our ears to keep humanity at odds with itself. And as long as we engage in this cycle and system of *us* against *them*, we will be find ourselves caught in endless cycles of judging and extracting judgment.

We cannot stand against the accuser. It is the Holy Spirit who is our defender. When we pay attention to the signs of the times, we will begin to see adversarial binaries and borders. And when we see them, we know to pay attention. When we see a wall going up between *two*, we know it is time to pray to God, the Holy Spirit. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that burns away walls of antagonism and false division. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that reconciles adversaries. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that breathes and from the ashes, raises up new life. It is the fire and flame of the Holy Spirit that burns down our walls—

walls that divide us from each other and imprison others. And this same Spirit blows and breathes, creating a new community of human beings, always building the Kingdom of God.

May we trust the Fire of God, even when it burns close to us and within us.

May we, when we find ourselves accusing another or being accused, may we pray to the Holy Spirit to our defender and judge.

May the Fire of God be our source and our power as we give ourselves to living as one humanity, the new community that is the Kingdom of God.