

## Good News...Fire on Earth?

We speak of the message of Christ as the good news which we have to share with the world. But Luke 12: 49-56 is not a passage that at first fits easily into our understanding of good news or the image of Jesus we cherish. In fact, these verses are not ones that we like to read or think about, but if we consider them closely there is an important message within them for us. The opening verse is a real shock to our image of Jesus as the caring Good Shepherd: "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!" Whoa! Bring fire to the earth? What happened to those images of angels bring a message of Peace on Earth and good will toward men which we sing about in the coming season when we celebrate Jesus' birth. Jesus seems to challenge that statement directly with the next few verses. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" As if that wasn't unsettling enough, the paired Hebrew Scripture from Isaiah which we read also is also not one to bring comfort. The prophet Isaiah is describing Israel as God's chosen vineyard; a vineyard planted and tended with care from which God expected fruits of righteousness and justice. This vineyard was to be a light to the world which would live by God's commandments and bring all people into that covenant relationship. It did not happen. Instead, Israel adopted the ways of the surrounding nations. Therefore, God says the vineyard will be destroyed, laid to waste. This text is clearly a statement about judgment concerning the ways the people have failed to respond to God's offers of steadfast love and mercy. The people want mercy and God's favor for themselves but do not extend mercy or justice to others. Since it is easy to recognize how broken our world is; how far from living justly with all we are; how we consistently fail to extend love and welcome to those who are not like us...these passages place before us the gap between what God desires from us and how we live...and raises the issue of consequences. When we begin to think about the passage from Luke we need to remember where in Jesus' ministry we are. Jesus has already set his face to Jerusalem and the completion of his ministry. We believe that Jesus has come to bring forgiveness to us and to reconcile us with God. We know that God claims us because of his steadfast love and mercy. We are forgiven because of God's abundant grace. We hold fast to those truths for ourselves. Then often we skip over the concept that God's love is for all—that God's grace is extended to all. We know that God expects that we should have a response to his grace and mercy. That expectation is not only made plain in the passage from Isaiah, but in the prayer Jesus taught---we ask the Lord to forgive our debts as we forgive others. God's grace acting in us should bear fruit in the world. I think that is where the passage from Luke speaks to us today. After the opening statement of bringing fire to the earth, Jesus talks about the divisions which will come. Divisions within households and families are predicted. The word for division which is used in this text is found only here in the New Testament—and the full meaning in the Greek is "division into partisan and contentious units". How appropriate is that for our times. Jesus here also speaks of a baptism with which to be baptized. Although Jesus was himself baptized, there is no mention of him baptizing the disciples or anyone else during his ministry. That this follows the statement about bringing fire to the earth leads to the association of this baptism with fire, not the water we usually associate with baptism. Baptism with water invokes a soothing image, baptism with fire as predicted by John the Baptist doesn't sound so comfortable. This baptism with fire is often seen as associated with the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the

description of tongues of flame which appeared. If we hold that image in our minds, how does it affect our perception of this fire which Jesus wants to be kindled soon. I can easily envision that Jesus wishes his disciples would more quickly grasp his message than the gospel accounts indicate that they were. We know that their passion for spreading the good news Jesus represented was kindled by the arrival of the Holy Spirit as described in Acts. Until then, after Jesus' resurrection, they still remained fearful and had not begun carrying out their role as Apostles—they were not yet bearing good fruit. Verse 50 also includes the phrase "what stress I am under until it is completed." Jesus, before he began the journey to Jerusalem and the cross and afterwards as he went, spent his time bringing healing to the sick but also teaching those who gathered around him to living a certain way. Jesus spent much of his ministry among those who suffered from injustice—the outcasts of society. He was in trouble very early with the religious leaders for challenging their ways—their hypocrisy. He challenged the systems which oppressed the poor; that did not provide justice; that were not based on the righteousness and right relationships. These things—the fruits God desires from his vineyard—were the same ones Jesus was passionate about. Jesus wanted to alter the status quo. Jesus wants those things which cause oppression and suffering to stop. When those who benefit from the status quo which leads to the conditions Jesus wants corrected—it is not peace which follows. The challenge Jesus issued led to the cross. Responding to Jesus' call to discipleship means those who follow him must also desire to change the systems of the status quo which lead to oppression, discrimination, prejudice, and suffering. And desiring to change the system still leads to divisions among those who want the change and those who do not. Luke tells us in Chapter 9 that Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem. In verse 50 when he speaks of that baptism, it is his baptism: "I have a baptism with which to be baptized." It can easily be seen that he is anticipating the cross to come and the completion of his earthly mission. This baptism is a singular event. That baptism is his alone—not yours or mine. The events in Jerusalem could easily be the source of the stress Jesus is feeling as he prepares his disciples for what is to come—for difficult times—as they are charged to spread the good news he has brought because not everyone will want to accept it. The vision of most living in Palestine at that time envisioned the Messiah as one who would restore the throne of David and Israel to what they considered her rightful place among the nations. Jesus' call was different. It was a call for them to follow the paths of righteousness and justice which God had asked of people from the beginning of the covenant relationship. This call was and is a challenge to the power structure of that day and of ours. The fire which Jesus speaks of bringing can be viewed from either of two images we associate with fire. Fire can be a destructive force. When we sit around a campfire or before a fireplace, we often forget that aspect of fire. We are reminded of it when summer heat and dry conditions raise the risk of wildfires which destroy forests and homes. The first image is pleasing and comforting. The second is destructive and frightening. But there is yet another image of fire. Fire can be used to purify—to burn away impurities. If we view the fire which Jesus said he came to bring to the earth as a way of cleansing us of our impurities, then yes, there is judgment present—we do have those impure places. But the process is not meant to be destructive, but instead one which cleans us so that we can truly become what God intended us to be—a community where love dominates so that righteousness governs our actions and justice prevails throughout. This process of purification is not one which happens without pain because it calls us to give up some things which we are very attached to. Things

like the ways we have been brought up to think about others not like us. It will not allow us to be complacent about prejudice or injustice when we encounter them. It calls us to view ourselves and our actions or inactions in the light of their effects on others. It calls us to work so that God's kingdom can come more fully into our present world. Standing up and speaking out in this manner may indeed cause divisions, but the call to be a disciple is a call to imitate Christ. In the sung responses to our prayers of confessions we ask that we be melted, or molded, or in some manner changed. There is pain and the possibility of division in change, but that seems to be what is called for in discipleship. So what does this message from Jesus about fire and divisions say to us this morning. Should we pass over it lightly because it makes us uncomfortable? Should we concentrate on the assurances of God's faithfulness to promises made? No, I think we should take very seriously God's desire for us to be fruitful; to be agents of justice and righteousness here and now. God does offer a grace so abundant we cannot fathom it. But experiencing that grace, we are called upon to offer love and forgiveness to those around us. We are called to name the injustice which exists in our communities. I am a big fan of country music two associations with this theme came to me. The first is one by Garth Brooks called *Standing outside the fire*. This song speaks of having a passion for living as being willing to take risks for love. The lyric states: "life is not tried, it is merely survived, if you're standing outside the fire." I think that Jesus calls us to live fully, and that means taking the risks involved in loving one another. It is not a perfect world and stepping out to walk in faith with love toward all is a risk that invites rejection. The other song which I would lift up is one by Randy Travis called "Points of Light." Those lyrics go like this: There's a point when you cannot walk away, when you have to stand up straight and tall and mean the words you say. There's a point you must decide just to do it cause it's right—that's when you become a point of light. There's a darkness that everyone must face. It wants to take what is good and fair and lay it all to waste. And that darkness covers everything in sight—UNTIL IT MEETS A SINGLE POINT OF LIGHT. All it takes is a point of light, a ray of hope in the darkest night. If you see what is wrong and try to make it right, you will be a point of light." I would rephrase that as you become a glimpse of God's kingdom here in this broken world. That is the fire which I believe Jesus is speaking about bringing to the earth—the passion within his disciples to be like him giving love and opposing those things which are contrary to God's purpose and will. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.