

JESUS: "I CAME TO BRING FIRE TO THE EARTH..." - Luke 12: 49-56
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A Sermon by
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Luke 12:49-56
"I came to bring fire to the earth."

I know that many of you have come here seeking a place of comfort and quiet consolation on this Communion Sunday. Your life is on fast-forward, awash in a sea of change and innovation, busy. I've talked to lots of people over the years who say that this is the major reason why they come to church -- to center themselves, to touch base with that which is stable and dependable, to get grounded. And the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is very much apart of this centering and grounding.

Yes, worship and sacrament is where we come to calm down, slow down, cool down, quiet down, and settle down.

This is church.

And then there's Jesus.

Did we hear him in today's Gospel?

"I came to bring fire to the earth."

Fire!

Did we hear him? Do you think I've come to bring peace? No! Peace is boring! Strife, division that's what I've come to do! I've come to split up families, divide homes, turn father against son, mother against daughter."

Fire!

My goodness what are we to do with this Jesus?

I confess I always feel a dread when we come to this particular text every three years. I also have a sense of dread when I come to this Jesus who uttered those words and who runs counter to so much that we've tried to make him.

In so much of my ministry, in my own discipleship, I have represented the gentle, shepherding, loving, pleasant, soothing friend we have in Jesus. But when Jesus begins to smolder, flicker into a white-hot flame, and talks about bringing divisions, I get nervous.

The children of Israel were freed from Egyptian slavery, in the wilderness. No sooner had they been made free than they said, "You know, at least as Pharaoh's slaves, we had three meals a day. With Yahweh, we don't know which steps to take next out here in the wilderness.

So did God say, "I'll let you slip back into slavery." Or, "I'll slow things down and let you take residence in the wilderness."

No.

God said, "I'll give you fire, a pillar of fire leading into the darkness, pulling you into my future. Fire!"

And Jesus said, "I'm kindling the same exodus fire. I'm going to take you places you've never been."

Moses, hunkered down out in Midian. He had killed a man back in Egypt. Moses is on the lam. He's trying to blend in with the wallpaper, posing as a shepherd. A bush bursts into flame.

Fire!

There's a voice. "I'm sending little old you to stand up to Pharaoh and the Empire. I'm sending you to speak for me to the King. Go! Speak!"

Jesus says, "I'm consumed with that fire and I intend to ignite you with it!"

As the Book of Hebrews puts it, "Our God is a consuming fire!"

The disciples gathered after the death and resurrection of Jesus. They were following the prescribed worship rites, just going through the motions, hiding, behind bolted doors, the reading of scripture droning on, ushers helping people to get comfortable, then sometime between the organ prelude and the morning offering, the building began to rumble, the doors swung open, and somebody shouted, "Fire!"

We call that day Pentecost. The church was born in the crucible, in the furnace of God's fire. Jesus said, "I'm looking for a few folk who are combustible. Is that you?"

Emma Goldman, great anarchist activist, did jail time because of her politics at the turn of the century. She got out of jail and took work as a midwife among the poor in Hell's Kitchen in New York City. Most of her activist friends assumed that Emma had thereby retired from her radical politics, that she was no longer a threat. They were

wrong. When a girl baby was delivered, Emma Goldman would whisper in the infant's ear, "Rebel! Rebel!"

Fire!

In East Germany, years ago, with a pastor who had suffered terribly under the Communists, he complained about an influx into his congregation of young, angry, disaffected rebels. "We're a closed society. There is nowhere for their dissent to be heard but in the church. It's the only place to take out your anger against the government. So, they buy denim jeans, let their hair grow long, and come to church where they are free to be angry."

When the church becomes the safe, all-inclusive place of middle class refuge for secure stability, and things cool off, cool down, it is not the incendiary fellowship Jesus incited us to be.

Yet when the church becomes ignited, fired up, disruptive and disrupted, a purifying and warming blaze, it is a glorious sight to behold. Jesus really did come to bring fire to the earth.