

Sunday, August 17, 2025
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15C)
Isaiah 5.1-7; Hebrews 11.29—12.2; Luke 12.49-56
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Bringing Fire to the Earth”

“Jesus said, ‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! . . . Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!’”

Great! I come back from Sabbatical and am immediately confronted with having to preach on some of Jesus’ more controversial words. To preach on a message that is completely contrary to who we view Jesus to be. Who we profess Jesus to be. Who we know Jesus to be. It’s enough to make me want to head back out the door and back to Sabbatical. To go back to a more peaceful and comfortable time where I did not have to deal with controversy, with difficult Gospel messages, with the challenges they present.

And yet, that’s precisely the point Jesus is trying to make. In fact, that is the point all our Scripture readings for today are trying to make. That the Gospel is not always nice and comfortable and easy to swallow. And by extension, that the life of faith is not always nice and comfortable and easy to follow.

We see this reflected, in one way or another, in each of our Scripture readings for today. Our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah is a portion of the “Song of the Vineyard.” Isaiah uses a traditional wine harvest song sung by a woman about her beloved as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. With God tending the vineyard that is Israel, only to be dismayed that despite his love and care, the vineyard begins to produce undesirable and unusable wild grapes: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” What had once been good and fruitful has somehow taken a turn. Necessitating action by the vintner—by God—to tear up the vineyard to make way for a vineyard that would bear good fruit. The message being that despite God’s best efforts, despite his love and care, his people ultimately chose not to follow his ways but rather went down a path of social injustice. A turning away from what was of greatest importance to God: care for all his people, particularly those on the margins.

While Isaiah focuses on the corporate, societal sin of the social injustice on the part of Israel, our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews focuses more on what it means for individuals to seek to live a life of faith. Beginning with the profound faith of the Hebrews as they fled slavery and persecution in Egypt, seeking a new life in the Promised Land. Maintaining faith throughout the Exodus was difficult enough within their own isolated community. But then, once in the Promised Land, they faced the realities of living their faith, of being faithful to God’s covenant, amongst other peoples and societies and religions. In a diverse world unlike what they had known for the last 40 years. Telling of some of the victories in establishing their place in their new homeland, while acknowledging the struggles of God’s people in doing so. The struggles

that, at times, included mocking, destitution, persecution, torment, and even death. All for the sake of establishing and maintaining a place in which they could be faithful to God's laws.

While God is a God of love and compassion, seeking to be in relationship with his people, our history reveals the difficulty and struggles of remaining faithful to God and his laws. The words are easy to say. Love God and love your neighbor. Putting them into practice is more challenging. Particularly in communal situations. And the larger and more diverse the community, the society, the nation, the more challenging it becomes. Ancient Israel discovered that as it sought to establish itself in the diverse and complex landscape of Canaan. She again discovered that as society, or at least, the long established social values, began to deteriorate under corrupt kings.

It is in light of these struggles, corporate and individual, the rocky history of Israel and the Jewish people in their struggle to remain faithful, that Jesus makes the statement he does in today's Gospel. Indicating that being faithful to God and God's laws, living in righteousness, is hard work. And, at times, requires hard choices, and difficult actions for us to remain truly faithful. Hard choices and difficult actions by Jesus Christ and by us. Choices and actions that are symbolized by the fire Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel.

When we think of fire, we generally think of it as a destructive force. Here in Southern California, we are all too familiar with the destructive nature of fire. The mass destruction virtually in our backyard this past January as the Eaton Fire destroyed large parts of Altadena and the surrounding foothills; and as the Palisades Fire destroyed parts of Pacific Palisades, Topanga, and Malibu. And, of course, the current wildfires burning throughout our state, as well as in other parts of the world. Such fires resulting in the destruction of structures and vegetation, as well as, at times, the tragic loss of life. And in the aftermath, the ongoing impacts, such as displacement of families, and the societal and economic upheaval from loss of property and businesses.

But of course, we know that fire is not always a bad thing. Aside from the more obvious positive uses for fire, such as keeping us warm and for cooking—which is not what Jesus was referring to—there are the purifying and cleansing uses for fire. Fire is used in the smelting process to extract usable metal from ore. Fire is used in the refining process to purify impure metals. And in controlled situations, fire can be used in some ecosystems to burn dead vegetation, allowing for growth of stronger, healthier trees, as well as improved habitat for wildlife.

So, fire can have both destructive as well as beneficial effects. While it may be tempting to view Jesus' comment "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" in an apocalyptic way—with images of the end times, the last judgment, and the burning fires of Hell—I have to believe he is really taking about the beneficial, purifying use of fire, not the negative, destructive effects. That Jesus does not want to destroy and end life, but wants to provide conditions for new life, for better life. After all, the statement he makes immediately after bringing up fire is "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" At this point in the Gospel, Jesus is already making his way to Jerusalem, knowing what awaits him there. And in the Gospels, when he talks about the baptism with which he is to be baptized, he is talking about his Passion. His death and resurrection. Just as

we believe that in our own baptisms, we die to an old way of life and are born into a new life, Jesus uses this same image as a way of describing his own journey to a new and resurrected life. That his death is not the destruction of life, but the means to new life.

If Jesus' entire purpose at this point in the Gospel is to be focused on his own new, resurrected life, knowing full well that it is ultimately done for the sake of humanity, that we will share in his new life, why would the fire he brings be about destruction? Other than in a metaphorical sense of the destruction of an old way of life. No, the fire he brings must be an image for the positive, purifying effects of his death leading to resurrection. How his resurrection makes way for our own resurrection, for our own purifying and rebirth into new life in him.

Although this purifying, life-renewing, life-giving fire that Jesus speaks of is not merely referring to our eventual resurrection into new life after we die. He says, "how I wish it were already kindled!" This is an expression of desire that his followers seek to live into a new way of life here and now. That we seek to kindle the fire that will result in necessary changes to reestablish faithful and righteous living according to God's laws: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. To do to others as we would have them do to us. Jesus' words are nothing short of a call to action. He brings the fire through his death and resurrection. The flame is passed to us in our baptisms, in our sharing in his death and resurrection, whereby we are made the Body of Christ. As his body in the world, we are the ones called to kindle the flame in the world around us.

There is one other image that fire evokes—one that is also applicable to the invitation, the call, to kindle the purifying flame Jesus speaks of. Fire is also often used in a more poetic way as an image for passion. We sometimes speak of a passion that burns within us. This image is even used in Scripture when the Prophet Jeremiah referring to his calling to be God's prophet, says "within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jer 20.9). Perhaps this passion—the need for a passion that burns like a flame within us—is another aspect of what Jesus was talking about. That through the purifying fire of resurrection and new life, the flame of God's love burns within us. It is this flame, this passion for the Gospel, that is wanting to be kindled through our words and actions. It is the fire of passion that makes possible the outward actions that are the expression of the purifying fire Jesus brings to us through his death and resurrection, through our new life in him.

Just as the vineyard that was Ancient Israel invoked in our reading from Isaiah devolved to bearing wild grapes, just as the Hebrews settling in the Promised Land faced struggles collectively and individually, we see in our own day increased societal struggles to maintain the Christian values we profess as a nation. No need to list them, as they are present in the newspaper, on the nightly news, and in your social media feeds. When presented with such accounts ask yourself, "is this an example of how we are to love our neighbors?" Increasingly, the answer is invariably "no, it is not."

Jesus gives us a choice. Do we cling to the ways we are currently doing things—the ways that are not working, that are not serving us, that are certainly not adhering to God's laws to love our neighbors—or do we seek a new way of being in the world. The new way that is only made possible by the purifying fire of God's love. A love that was kindled at the beginning of Creation,

a love that has continually burned in God's faithful people, a love that was kindled anew in Christ's death and resurrection, a love that burns in us even now. How will we choose to use that fire that burns within us?