

Fire, Division and Decision



This is the third straight Sunday in which the gospel reading has been taken from Luke 12. Throughout the chapter Jesus has continued to call for people to “see,” a message that has been present since the beginning of the mission of the 72 disciples told at the beginning of Luke 10. A message made clear upon their return: *“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I say to you, many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”* (Luke 10:23-24). Along the continuing journey to Jerusalem each person becomes an opportunity for Jesus to help them (and the crowds) to see more clearly, more richly: the scholar of the Law in Luke 10:25 ff; Martha and Mary (vv.38-42); the disciples in Luke 11, as well as the Pharisees in that same encounter; and Jesus continually speaks so that they will become “rich in what matters to God” (Luke 12:21).

Luke 12 introduces one of the oldest messages of the Bible, Old Testament and New: the “*day of the Lord*.” It was a key theme of the post-Exilic prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, Obadiah, Joel and Malachai. The “*day*” was one of rescue and salvation for the faithful and a day of judgment upon the wicked. Here in Luke 12, Jesus’ ongoing proclamation of the kingdom now contains the message of a coming judgment (Luke 12:4-10), clearly told in the parable of the Rich Fool (vv.16-21). The theme and image is amplified in vv. 49-53 when the Word of God is described as a refining and purifying fire. The acceptance or rejection of that Word will be a source of conflict and dissension even within families. Our gospel reading has an ominous beginning:

⁴⁹ *“I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! ⁵⁰ There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵² From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law*

against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” (Luke 12:49-53; this is the gospel reading for Sunday)

That had to have been (and still is) a startling beginning: *“I have come to set the earth on fire...”* Every time and place has experiences of the ravaging effects of uncontrolled fiery maelstroms. Patricia Sanchez offers this insight:

“Fire! - The very mention of this word stirs fear in the human heart. Indeed so horrific is the potential of fire to destroy life and reduce to ashes even the most solid and sturdy of structures that it is a crime to irresponsibly shout this word in a public place! Every year, forest fires, fed by powerful desert winds, burn a wide swath of destruction across miles and miles of land. Every year, through carelessness and maliciousness, lives are lost, homes are leveled, and many lose their means of livelihood to fire. So dreaded is the mere specter of fire that it has, since ancient times, been associated with the retribution to be suffered by the evil and unrepentant after death. Given the ordinary human regard for and experience of fire, it seems strange (if not shocking!) that Jesus would claim that he had come to light a fire on earth and that he wished for the blaze to be ignited.”

..and yet Jesus offers us this strange and shocking image.

The lectionary for Sunday gospel “skips” over the next verses that are generally considered part of the same pericope. With the warning given, Jesus now admonishes the listener to rightly judge and *“interpret the present time.”*

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, “When you see (a) cloud rising in the west you say immediately that it is going to rain—and so it does; ⁵⁵ and when you notice that the wind is blowing from the south you say that it is going to be hot—and so it is. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; why do you not know how to interpret the present time? ⁵⁷ “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ If you are to go with your opponent before a magistrate, make an effort to settle the matter on the way; otherwise your opponent will turn you over to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the constable, and the constable throw you into prison. ⁵⁹ I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.” (Luke 12:54-59

That judgment demands a full payment.

A Call for Decision

Our gospel text is not one you find on many refrigerator doors or on greeting cards. The image of Jesus in these texts is upsetting to one who only seeks the meek and mild Jesus. Having begun with an exhortation to courage in the face of tribulation, continuing with a warning against avarice in the face of fear, Jesus now raises the issue of judgment. The people are called to conversion before it is too late.

The twinned images of baptism and fire were present in Luke’s gospel early on: *“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”* (Luke 3:16). What differs here is that this baptism refers to Jesus himself, not to anyone else.

Fire

Interestingly, in the NT only rarely does “fire” (*pyr*) denote the earthly phenomenon. If Luke’s usage is not literal, then what are the possibilities? What is the fire Jesus comes to cast? Some possibilities from Luke/Acts (*from Brian Stoffregen*):

- purification = removing the bad from the good
 - o the unfruitful trees from the fruitful (Luke 3:9)
 - o the chaff from the wheat (Luke 3:17; see also Jer 6:29; Zeph 13:9; Mal 3:2)
- judgment = total destruction
 - o by James and John against Samaritans (Luke 9:54)
 - o by God on Sodom (Luke 17:29; Gen 19:24)
- the presence of God
 - o Jesus, who baptizes with Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16)
 - o the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire (Acts 2:3)
 - o the angel in the burning bush (Acts 7:30; Ex 3:2)
- a sign of the last days (Acts 2:19; Joel 2:28-32; 2 Peter 3:12)
- a source of warmth and light on a cold, dark night (Luke 22:55; Acts 28:2)

Other possibilities

- fire used in sacrifices (Ex 29:14; 29:34, etc.)
- fire used to destroy the idol of the golden calf (Ex 32:20, 24)
- connected with the Word of God (Is 30:27; Jer 5:14; 23:29)

Given the variety of meanings with Luke's writings, the meaning of this passage is far from obvious. An argument can be made for any of Luke's metaphorical uses of "fire." In a larger context of Luke's narrative, especially the Jerusalem journey, one must remember that Jesus continually asks people to "see" that God's care and providence (*cf.* 12:22-28) now is only a sign of the salvation that awaits. God's desire is to give us the kingdom (v.32). Yet the journey to that kingdom involves judgment. Whatever the meaning, the sense of urgency and decision is clear.

"I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" (v.49) likely includes the richness of all the Lucan expressions – Jesus came to bring the Word of God, to bring salvation, to purify, and to fill the world with God's Spirit, to form a holy and faithful people. A people "on fire" for God. But, Jesus is saying that God's plan for salvation involves judgment, but a judgment that the Messiah will bear for others, not one he will inflict on others. It is not an attractive prospect, but Jesus longs for it to come, so that the saving work be accomplished.

Baptism

"There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!" (v.50) The word *baptizō* used here is the same as that used for water baptism elsewhere in the NT. However, clearly Jesus is not referring to a water baptism (Luke 3:21-22) as that has already occurred. The verbal form of the word means to "plunge" offering several possible meanings:

- Jesus' plunge into humanity (the Incarnation) is completed with Jesus' experience of human death
- At the end of the journey, Jesus will plunge into the fullness of the Father's will as he willingly accepts *"death, even death on a cross"* (Phil 2:8)

Jesus' language in Luke echoes what we hear in the Gospel of Mark when the apostles James and John ask to be seated at Jesus' right and left when he enters his glory. Jesus responds: *"You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"* (Mk 10:38) This saying in Mark comes on the heels of Jesus' prediction of his own

suffering and death in Mk 10:32-34. If Luke has adopted this same meaning then “baptism” here refers to the Passion and death of Jesus and is likely to reflect inundation of the waters of divine judgment in floods to wash away the stain of sin (cf. Ps. 18:4, 16; 42:7; 69:1-2; Isa. 8:7-8; 30:27-28; Jon. 2:3-6). This idea of the cleansing action of baptism – because of the death and resurrection of Jesus – is clear in NT writings (1 Pt 3:20, 1 Cor 6:11, Eph 5:26, Hb 10:22, Acts 2:38 and 22:16).

More to the point, the baptism-death of Christ connection is made clear in the NT:

- *“Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection”* (Romans 6:3-5).
- *“You were buried with him [Jesus] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead”* (Col 2:12).

The expression “*how great is my anguish*” indicates the cost of the cross for Jesus – but the entire referent of “*until it is accomplished!*” reminds us to be clear about what is being accomplished. Usually this Greek word for “completed” (*teleō*) is used of “completing” or “fulfilling” a prior written word: the law of the Lord (2:39); the prophets (18:31); scripture (22:37 & Ac 13:29). The verses about fulfilling “the prophets” and “scriptures” refer not only to Jesus’ passion and death, but as later NT passages makes clear what is being fulfilled, or completed, is our being raised to new life in Christ. As well, the Reign of God, is beginning to break into the human sphere.

Division

To the question whether Jesus came to bring peace most of us would unhesitatingly reply ‘Yes’. But Jesus’ “*No, I tell you*” is emphatic (*ouchi*). Why would Jesus proclaim He has come to create division? “Divisiveness erodes the social, political, emotional and psychological bonds that bind us, one to another. Divisiveness is spawned by antagonism, distrust, hostility and often erupts into war. Divisiveness eats away at the viable network of human society, leaving lonely, disconnected isolates in its wake. Why then would Jesus choose to characterize his purpose and mission in terms of fire and division? Was he frustrated by his disciples’ obtuseness? Had he become impatient with Jewish rejection and resentful of Roman oppression? Had he decided that his message of gentle caring and merciful forgiveness needed “teeth”? Or, was he simply being frank, honest, and realistic as regards the very serious crisis confronting humankind by virtue of his person and mission?” [Patricia Sanchez]

Divisive is often the effect of prophetic speech. In this Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Simeon (Luke 2:35). But one must note that the division is really caused – not by the prophetic speech – but by the decisions one makes because of that speech. This has already been seen when people are called to decide if Jesus is of God or of Satan (Luke 11:14-20). Those who see Jesus must decide rightly lest “*the light in you not become darkness*” (11:35).

The cross challenges people. Jesus calls on his followers to take up their own cross as they follow him (9:23ff.; 14:27). When people do not rise to this challenge it is not unusual for them to become critical of those who do. Jesus’ words are quite literal and were the experience of the early church (and in differing ways, the experience of the church is all ages). Verses 52-53 strongly echo the words of the OT: “*For the son dishonors his father, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man’s enemies are those of his household. But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will put my trust in God my savior; my God will hear me!*” (Micah 7:6-7).

Jesus' ministry necessarily demanded a definitive decision on the part of his would-be followers. Their *yes* had to be *yes*; their *no* had to be *no*. Christianity precludes indecision as well as compromise. Surrendering to compromise and infidelity was the error made by so many of the Old Testament communities - even when confronted by their prophets. When the prophet dared to confront them, they turned on the prophet, denounced him and often tried to kill him. Surrendering to lukewarmness in their discipleship was also the mistake made by the church in Laodicea; a community that some described as a perfect model of inoffensive Christianity. Therefore, they were told that God would spew them out as one would spew out bitter, tepid water.

Culpepper (*Luke*, New Interpreters Bible, p.267) reflects on this passage:

Repeatedly, the warnings about the coming judgment have forced us to examine the implications of our commitments. It is all too easy to make commitments in one area of life as though they did not affect other areas also. Jesus warned that those who make a commitment to him will be persecuted, that a commitment of faith also means that our attitude toward material possessions must change, and that moral responsibilities must be taken with even greater seriousness. Now Jesus warns that persons who make a commitment to him will find their relationships to others, even those closest to them, affected by that commitment. We cannot make a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord without its affecting the way we related to friends and to family members. Because our commitment to Christ shapes our values, priorities, goals, and behavior, it also forces us to change old patterns of life, and these changes may precipitate crises in significant relationships.

The urgency of the kingdom

Jesus is asking his disciples to clearly see the culmination of his mission in the return of the Son of Man at the time of judgment. He is already engaged in the task of lighting a fire on the earth to prepare people for judgment, all the while noting that judgment is taking place as people decide for or against him.

The "fire" of Christ is also given in the Holy Spirit as well (Acts 2:3–4); the fire of the Holy Spirit will be cast on the earth through the fulfillment of the events for which Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem. Jesus means by his "baptism" the plunge into this saving mission, a prospect that produces mixed emotions because of the suffering connected with it. Some of his teaching on forgiveness and peace may have given the impression that he was spreading a soft gospel; John the Baptist seems to have worried about that (7:18–23). Jesus assures his listeners that Christian discipleship is costly, even causing division in the family (Mark 3:21; John 7:5).

The signs of the times

The illustration (vv.54-55) seems to point to the weather patterns in the Near East. The Mediterranean Sea was to the west and winds from that direction brought rain. The desert was to the south and winds from that direction brought heat. It is not clear whether these words were spoken on the same occasion as the preceding verses. There is no direct connection. Matthew gives a similar saying in response to a request for a sign. Still, it is interesting to note that here, while Jesus is encouraging, exhorting people to "see," he again uses the accusatory "hypocrite." Jesus has only used this expression once before in Luke's gospel: "*How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me remove that splinter in your eye,' when you do not even notice the wooden beam in your own eye? You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother's eye*" (Luke 6:42).

By calling them hypocrites Luke suggests that they share in the blindness of the lawyers (scholars of the law) who have "*taken away the key of knowledge. You yourselves did not enter and you stopped*

those trying to enter” (Luke 11:52). Jesus concludes by saying that the people must interpret (12:56) and judge for themselves what is right (v.57)

“Interpret” (v. 56 twice) is a bit of a stretch as a translation of the Greek word *dokimazo*. The basic meaning of this word group is “to test”. The definitions given by Lowe & Nida [2:66] are:

1. to try to learn the genuineness of something by examination and testing, often through actual use
2. to regard something as being worthwhile or appropriate
3. to regard something as genuine or worthy on the basis of testing

The second meaning seems to best fit our verse. The people “regard the appearances of earth and sky as worthwhile or appropriate.” That is, I think, they will take the time to check the direction of the wind. They plan their planting or harvesting or picnics or travel accordingly. They take the direction of the wind seriously and let that determine their actions. Are we observant regarding the signs of our times?

Part of Culpepper’s (*Luke*, New Interpreters Bible, p.269) reflections on these verses:

To what do we pay close attention, and to what do we turn a blind eye?...

Jesus’ sayings challenge us to examine the inconsistencies between attention and neglect in our own lives, but the underlying challenge is to consider whether these inconsistencies reveal a pattern of prioritizing the insignificant while jeopardizing the things of greatest value and importance. Have we given as much attention to the health of the church as we have to our golf score? Have we given as much attention to the maintenance of our spiritual disciplines as to the maintenance schedule for our car? Where in the scale of our attention to detail does our devotion to the teachings of our Lord rank?

The signs of the time are everywhere, and so was spiritual blindness. Not reading this weather correctly is dangerous. Having issued warnings of approaching division and the nature of the times, Jesus calls on the multitudes to make one more judgment. He actually calls for their reflection: “*Why don’t you judge for yourselves what is right?*” The picture is a simple one. The judgment in view is a legal, civil dispute (given Jesus mentions settling accounts prior to reaching the “*magistrate*.”) Failing to settle accounts you will end up in the hands of a *praktor*, a kind of sheriff, tax collector and general financial official. In this context the *praktor* is a sort of bailiff in charge of the debtors’ prison. Jesus’ advice is simple: settle up accounts and avoid prison. In fact, his imagery is graphic, for those who fail to settle accounts and are found guilty will be “thrown” to prison.

In Luke this is a key moment on the journey to Jerusalem. The disciples and the people are the ones on the road (13:58) who must make their decision now, before it is too late. If they do not settle things with their adversary – in this case the prophet who calls them to conversion – then it will be harder for them when judgment comes.

Jesus closes by assuring them that negligent debtors will certainly have to pay the debt, down to the very last copper coin. The use of the Greek double negative *ou me* makes his statement emphatic – you will *never* get out without payment.

Notes

Luke 12:49 to set the earth on fire: The Greek expression is “to throw fire on the earth.” The image recalls the prophet Elijah who drew down fire from the Lord against the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:36-40) and also on the soldiers of King Ahaz (2 Kings 1:10-14). This image also echoes Jesus’ own disciples who wanted to call down heavenly fire upon a town of Samaritans (Luke 9:45) when they refused to receive Jesus. If prophetic imagery is the key, then Jesus desires the end-time judgment promised by John the Baptist: the tree not bearing fruit being thrown into the fire (3:9) and the chaff thrown into unquenchable fire (3:16). However, Luke also associates fire with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

fire: (*pýr*) In OT usage fire can represent a theophany of God, a means of judgment, a sign of grace, or be used as a term for God. In most OT theophanies fire represents God’s holiness and glory. The fire may be natural (Ex. 19) or it may be the unusual fire of the burning bush (3:2; cf. Judg. 6:21). The pillar of fire represents God’s ongoing presence (Ex. 13:21-22). At Horeb God himself is not in the fire (1 Kings 19:12); true revelation is by the word. At the call of Isaiah (ch. 6) fire purges unclean lips. In Ezek. 1:28 fire expresses the divine radiance (cf. Dan. 7).

God judges by fire and brimstone in Gen. 19:24. Fire and hail form the seventh plague in Ex. 9:24. Fire from God or from heaven is a phrase for judgment in Lev. 10:2; 2 Kings 1:10. Fire smites both Israel’s enemies (Am. 1:4-14:2:2) and disobedient Israel herself (Am. 2:5). Eschatologically, fire is a sign of the day of the Lord (Joel 2:20), it denotes final destruction (Mal. 3:19), and it stands for eternal punishment (Mal. 3:19). Also see Jer. 43:12; Ezek. 15:7; Hos. 8:14; Nah. 3:13; Zech. 13:9; and Mal. 3:2-3;

Interestingly, only rarely does *pýr* denote the earthly phenomenon in the NT. Fire is a figure of final judgment (cf. the unfruitful tree in Mt. 3:10, chaff in Mt. 3:12, tares in Mt. 13:40, unfruitful branches in Jn. 15:6). James 5:3 interweaves the material and figurative elements more closely. The testing fire of Prov. 17:3 is applied in 1 Pet. 1:7 to the keeping of hope and faith in afflictions, and in Rev. 3:18 to repentance with a view to true riches. [TDNT 4:928-52]

Luke 12:50 baptism: *baptizō* This is not a baptismal image. In v.50 Jesus uses the image of baptism for all that which he must undergo – from the journey to Jerusalem, through the Passion and unto death on the cross. Some scholars see this reference as the baptism of death being a total human submission into the most absolute God-forsakenness; others limit the participation to a more limited submission, e.g., “Father into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). What is clear is that the image of baptism here refers exclusively to Jesus: He goes his way alone in the expectation of the judgment (*πῦρ*) which brings salvation, which he brings and to which he submits himself. There are other places in which such an expression carries a meaning that pertains to discipleship (e.g. Mark 10:38 *ff*, Luke 12:42, 51-53) [EDNT 1:192-96]

how great is my anguish: *synéchōmai* literally means “enclosed, hemmed in, constrained.” This same word is used in Phil. 1:23. There the thought is perhaps Paul is governed by two things and hence hemmed in. Luke 12:50 has caused much debate as to how to understand *synéchōmai*. The reference to death suggests the translation: “How troubled or pressed I am!” but the saying about fire in v. 49 suggests: “How I am totally governed by this!” The saying expresses Jesus’ movement to vicarious death. Like the fire that he has come to kindle, this is the beginning of the new aeon; hence its total claim on him. [TDNT VII:877-87]

accomplished: *teleō* means to complete, fulfill, accomplish – not as a fate or destiny – but as a mission which plays out its purpose in time and is rooted in the ethic of a higher calling.

Luke 12:51 peace on earth: What is surprising is the seeming contradiction with infancy account’s

promise that Jesus would bring peace (1:19; 2:14, 29). However, those who accept Jesus have this peace (7:50; 8:48; 10:5-6) and as a result are separated from those who reject the prophet's message. Such separation inevitably leads to division.

Luke 12:52 *From now on a household...*: Compare this to the analogy of Satan's household in 11:17-18.

Luke 12:53 *a father ...against his son*: Interestingly this is a reversal of the promise made concerning the mission of John by Gabriel, that like Elijah, he would "*turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous*" (1:17)

Luke 12:59 *the last penny*: Greek, *lepton*, lit. "a very small amount." Matthew 5:26 has for "the last penny" but uses the Greek word *kodrantēs* (Latin quadrans, "farthing"). Only Mark 12:42 offers the explanation of the two *lepta* cast into the treasury: "that is, a quadrans." The two *lepta* of Mark 12:42 together had a value of one sixty-fourth of a denarius. [EDNT 2:349-350]

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