

Sunday, August 17, 2025

“There Will Be Fire”

Rev. Nick Hatch

Luke 12:49-56

Let us Pray: God of scorching love, help us hold a honest view of ourselves and the world around us. Give us strength to be faithful in faithless places. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Dad, can we do something... adventurous? Something new?” queried Elijah.

“All you can handle” I responded.

And the next day we found ourselves kayaking down the south fork of the Flambeau River. We put in at Smith Rapids covered bridge, and soon our little kayaks scrapped and slammed boulders as we laughed our way down the clear-brown river. Large red pines loomed towards our sides. Ducks occasionally flew in front of us. The cool rushing waters dripped from my paddle onto my sun-burned thighs and like the rest of Wisconsin, the sun was a deep red from Canadian wildfires. The air was thick and hung heavily around us: its filtered light casting strange shadows through the woods and waters with a foreboding end time appearance.

As the day wore on the rapids gave way to long glassy stretches requiring hard paddling... the heat set in and we worked hard to cover the miles of river to our takeout.

“How much further, it’s so hot” asked Elijah just before he decided to flip his kayak and immerse himself in the cool waters. We stopped to have some snacks and catch a few fish. All the while there was not one house, road, or trace of people to be seen. At the end of the day, we reached Cedar Rapids.

We drug and scooted our way over the rock garden. Our arms ached. Our skin was hot. The smoke from the fires left us drained and with headaches. And Amanda showed up the moment we arrived, at just the right time.

As we loaded the kayaks on the dusty red-dirt road Elijah, smiling, said “Dad, that was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. My arms hurt bad. But don’t get me wrong I had a great time.”

“Good! You did great, and I had a great day too” I replied.

I thought to myself how grateful I was for him to have this challenge to help prep him for life’s discomfort. I was also proud that even in true discomfort he voiced gratitude for the blessing of such a beautiful - and hard-won day.

At first glance, most preachers would cringe at the text from Luke. I also suspect that many of us who have endured judgement or unkind treatment from the church or a fellow Christian find this strong language uncomfortable and even hurtful.

Yet, the Gospel of Luke portrays the life of Jesus as a savior who has come for reconciliation, forgiveness, mercy, self-sacrifice, and peace. Jesus is a balm for shattered lives, fresh air for those choking on sin, and the Savior of the irredeemable.

In the Old Testament Zechariah prophesized these words:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High.

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon^a us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to
guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Even after his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus himself stood among his disciples and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

So, when Jesus words of division are set against in his scriptural backdrop of peace and unity, most find these words harsh, confusing, and dissonant.

I wonder how Jesus who ushers in the eternal peace of God - can declare he brings the devastation of scorching fire?

I wonder why Jesus would choose such a personal context of parent-child relationship to declare the reality of division and conflict?

If scripture teaches us anything, it's that life together, in community, is complex and difficult. Perhaps our community is a biological family, an adoptive family, a stepfamily; a circle of friends which are family, a church family bound by faith and devotion. Whatever the nature of the family involved, ruptures in relationships and painful unresolved conflicts are often part and parcel of our togetherness.

Our kinship in Christ necessitates a web of social and biological connections. And All of them are profoundly impacted by our individual and corporate calling from the Servant Son. Our marriages, friendships, neighborliness, blood ties and proximity acquaintances- all of them are now pulled into the churning waters of our faith journeys: where at times we struggle to paddle, at times glide, at times we hurt or laugh, at times lose our way and barely tread water.

One theologian muses:

Perhaps the dilemma and tension of Jesus saying cannot, and should not, be completely resolved. Instead, the pericope is best understood in light of the totality of the gospel story and the interplay between the ways of God and the realities of human history. In that light, one could say that the passage is descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, it is not Jesus's purpose to set children against their parents, or parents against their children, but this sort of rupture can happen as a result of the changes engendered by Christ's work. – Audrey West

Discipleship necessitates personal and collective - transformation.

Jesus continually reminds us that what binds us together is not a covenant of lineage, but a covenant of faith. Specifically, a covenant of blood - his blood. So serious is this assertion that it places real-world demands upon us to live graciously, speak inclusively, work for justice and inclusion, pray with compassion, and offer the world a kind of love which is confusing by the world's standards.

An incarnational faith means living boldly definition. And this bold definition exists alongside the reality of separation from God and one another. This is what we call sin and through the mighty strength of God - we can practice acknowledging and confessing the entire scope of who we are.

Forgiveness necessitates a transgression.

A living peace thrives in opposition to breathing conflict.

Jesus words are made manifest when they are breathed into the real world which contains brokenness, suffering, indifference and evil: blinding hope and eternal joy, moments of sunshine breaking through the darkest day; friendships and work which are meaningful and fulfilling. Jesus's fire he speaks of isn't so much an Armageddon like destruction; but names the reality that people who seek to live out Jesus' ethos are just as subject to division and hostility as anyone else.

In Jesus' day, the most personal, foundational and seemingly immovable building block of society was the family household.

And so, I wonder: what are the personal, foundational, and immovable blocks of society today? Family? Religion? Community? Political affiliation?

To all these Jesus boldly says "There will be scorching heat" for the long shadows of the Prince of Peace extend themselves even into this present time. "Oh, how I wish it were kindled already!" Proclaims the one Baptized by immersion and swept into the River Jordan.

The Good News is all about reversals; great turnarounds of people and situations that have logically and historically proved themselves as irredeemable. And more often than not people have a stake in preventing true reversals. We might recoil at the idea of forgiveness being offered to those we judge as lacking contrition. We may harbor resentment and anger towards those we see as selfish and unworthy of the lavishness of grace. And when it comes to our families, to those we know in “kinship” - our entrenched thinking can prove to be an immovable mooring, holding whole constellations of relationships firmly in place. Sometimes this proves uncomfortable and hurtful and does not align with the work of the Spirit.

I wonder what do you hold with you today which the fire of the Spirit seeks to scorch and burn away?

Having faith in reversals, confronting the irredeemable, and living an incarnational faith all hold paradox. So, I share this poem entitled “World of Contradictions”

O God of Peace, your beauty calls us
 While conflict rages and cares dismay:
 How can we smile when love impels us
 To strive and bleed to end the fray?
 When healing flees as pain consumes us
 Or pity fires our angry eyes,
 How dare an opening leaf beguile us
 Or birdsong taunt the thundery sky?
 How dare you, God, assault our grieving
 With tender buds and radiant stars?
 The gossamer grass and pearly sunset
 Make mock of justice's call to arms.

You set before us calm and beauty,
Truth, justice, mercy-where is peace?
How can we choose when torn by tension
When blessings sooth while hates increase?
Creator God, Your gift of freedom
Reveals you trust us; come what may
We walk this world of contradictions
In steadfast anguish, Jesus's way.

- Mary Ann Ebert, *In the Way of Peace*

Thank God that there will be scorching heat, that the embers of the refiners' fire will blister and peel away our former life. Thank God for the journey which causes us to ache and sun which burns but gives life. God, may we be interpreters of this glorious and present day, whose shadows are full of the incarnate Son of Man, who will meet us when we arrive, just in time.

Amen.