**WHEN GOOD NEWS IS BAD NEWS**

Luke 12: 49-56

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Charles Darwin believed that the two most significant achievements in human history were the development of language and the harnessing of fire. I don’t know if that’s true or not, but today we’re going to apply both – fire and language -- to our understanding of the gospel.

**IN THE NATURE OF FIRE**

I have witnessed, firsthand, the horrible, painful, and destructive power of unharnessed fire. I have held the hands of parents as their children’s burn wounds were being debrided in the hospital, and I have walked through the ashes and the ruins left behind by a forest fire in the Great Smoky Mountains. I have coughed and felt the burning in my lungs from the smoke of wildfires burning a thousand miles away and I have hugged people who have lost all they own in a housefire.

But I have also been well served by fire that is harnessed for our benefit. I have cooked my food with fire making it not just edible (some might even say delicious) but safe. I have had my own wounds cauterized by fire on the hospital operating table so they could heal. I have a lovely ornament on my Christmas tree made from blown glass that was made possible by the intense heat of a fire. I live in a house that is warmed by fire in the winter, and I have known comfort of a fireplace in the living room and the joy of roasting hotdogs and marshmallows around a campfire with my children and grandchildren.

Is it this dual nature of fire – creative and destructive, capable of causing both pain and comfort, able to take life and to save it – that Jesus is pointing to when he uses fire as a metaphor in today’s gospel text? Let’s look and see, shall we?

**FIRE IN THE NEWS**

Wednesday, August 6 -- Evacuation orders have been issued as a large brush fire burns east of Anza in the Ribbonwood area of Riverside County.

As of 10 p.m. on Tuesday, crews said the fire was 1,658 acres (roughly the size of 1300 football fields) and 15% contained after firefighters on the ground and in water-dropping helicopters battled the blaze throughout the day, Cal Fire said. Nearly 350 fire engines, several water-dropping aircraft and 300 firefighters were assigned to the incident.

The blaze, dubbed the Rosa Fire, was first reported at around 3 p.m. on Monday near Highway 74 in the Mountain Center Community and quickly grew to engulf more than 1,200 acres in just two hours, according to the Cal Fire/Riverside County Fire Department.

The cause of the blaze is under investigation, and no injuries have been reported.

And now, California firefighters are battling another blaze, the Canyon Fire which started just four days ago.

That’s two wildfires that are burning in the United States. There are 75 others, two are considered out of control, one of which is the Grand Canyon fire, the largest in the country, labeled a “mega fire” which has so far consumed over 126,000 acres (195 square miles), about the same as 95,000 football fields or the entire city of Chicago. Or, try to picture a square of land 14 miles long on each side.

There are 225 wildfires currently burning in Canada with over 101 labeled “out of control.” As of this writing they have consumed 8,318,000 acres – 13,000 square miles, roughly the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined.

And least we think that those are empty, wilderness acres, just bushes and trees, let us remember that 24 Americans and 30 Canadians have lost their lives in those fires. More than 12,000 homes, businesses, schools and other structures have been destroyed by wildfires in the Greater Los Angeles area alone.

Move away from wildfires and consider house fires. In 2023, the last year for which complete figures are available, there were 345,000 house fires in the USA. 50 firefighters died fighting them and 1,282 civilians were killed. The leading cause of house fires: cooking.

Fire is dangerous and destructive. But it is not evil. It is not capable of intent. It just consumes whatever is in its path without judgment or prejudice. That is its nature.

But it is also the nature of fire to sterilize and purify. As surely as fire is capable of taking life it is capable of causing life as well. We human beings are well served by fire. Indeed, our species would not have survived as long as it has without it.

By harnessing fire, early humans were able to cook food, making it safer, more digestible, and more nutritious, not to mention tastier.

Cooking expanded dietary options and supported brain development. Fire provided heat in cold climates, enabling human migration and survival in diverse environments. It also helped dry clothes, preserve food, and create livable spaces.

Campfires deterred predators and insects and the fire of candles and lanterns extended waking hours, allowing for nighttime learning, socializing, and planning.

Fire was essential in metallurgy—smelting ores to create tools, weapons, and later, machines. It purifies precious metals by burning off dross -- the hotter the fire, the purer the gold. It enabled pottery, glassmaking, and other crafts that shaped civilizations.

The first mechanized modes of transportation were powered by steam engines which were powered by fire and the internal combustion engines that propel our cars, today are powered by finely harnessed fire.

Fire is a gift that is as useful and beneficial as it is dangerous and destructive and, in Luke’s gospel, Jesus sees it as a perfect metaphor for the Kingdom of God. Let’s take a closer look at what it is, exactly, that Jesus says about this incendiary message he is preaching.

**A HOUSE DIVIDED AND AFLAME**

“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze… Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”

Is that frustration or maybe impatience we hear in the voice of Jesus in this passage? Strange words coming from the one who, at Christmas we celebrated as the “Prince of Peace.”

Up to this point in the chapter he has been talking about hypocrisy in the organized religion of his time (Judaism) and Luke is making the same point about hypocrisy in the early Christian church. Jesus starts with a metaphor: Who will fare worse, he asks in a parable, those servants who know the master’s will and don’t do it, or those servants who don’t do the master’s will because they don’t know what it is. The coming kingdom of God, he says, will easy for those don’t know God’s will (gentiles and pagans) but hard for those who know God’s will but don’t do it (Jews and Christians.)

Now, he switches his metaphor from servants to fire.

The Kingdom is like fire, he says. It warms those who are cold and protects those who are weak and vulnerable. It lights the way for those who want to see and it cooks the food of those who wish for their souls to be nourished by God’s word.

But, like a fire, if it is unharnessed, it burns and consumes that which stands in its way. Those who think that the kingdom is all coffee and donuts, punch and cookies in the fellowship hall, or Kum Ba Ya around the campfire, the sort of calm, placid, inoffensive, ineffective, and impotent fellowship most people want and expect when they come to church are going to be sadly disappointed.

Those who seek to control the means of grace and dole it out only to those who pay for it or earn it are going to find their “house” burned to ashes. Those who offer charity to those in need only after they have answered to their own satisfaction the question, “What’s in it for me?” will discover their “fields” burned to stubble. Those who let human suffering eat away at the core of humanity when they could easily alleviate it with a minimum of personal sacrifice will find their “orchards” stripped bare and their wealth burned away like so much waste and slag.

**FAIR WARNING**

In today’s lesson, Jesus gives fair warning about how the fire of the gospel will affect those who proclaim it and those who hear it proclaimed. R. Alan Culpepper in his New Interpreter's commentary (p. 266) says it as provocatively as he does plainly: “Although the Kingdom of God is characterized by reconciliation and peace, the announcement of that kingdom is always divisive because it requires decision a commitment,” commitment to things that are contrary to the world’s wisdom. And those stresses are the fires born of words that cause pain and scars even as they purify and cleanse that which they touch and consume.

And where will these fires burn the hottest? Why, in relationships, of course. Living life by Kingdom values will shake up our relationships to the things we own and want to own. Living life by Kingdom values will shake up our relationships with the people we befriend and who befriend us. It may even shake up our relationships with our families.

Like a raging wildfire, the gospel comes crashing into the turmoil of our world as both a destructive and constructive force. The fire of God's judgment burns away at the dried and decaying timbers of injustice, unrighteousness, and evil while God’s purifying grace brings renewal and hope.

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My wife, Jean, is a registered nurse and her first job out of nursing school was at the Shriners Hospital for Children Burns Center in Cincinnati. I was, at that time, in graduate school at the University of Cincinnati just down the street and, occasionally, we would meet at the hospital for lunch.

One time she was running late and instead of meeting in the cafeteria as we always did, she invited me to come up to the floor where she worked and meet the staff and some of the children. I agreed.

Big mistake.

She had told me about the work she did and the patients she worked with, but the reality was a world away from her description which she had apparently softened for me. Her patients were all children from infants to teenagers; all horribly burned in accidents and some from abuse.

The evidence of intense pain filled the unit – crying, moaning, even screaming. Drugs, I was told, only softened but never completely alleviated burn pain. The wounds and scars were nightmarish. The treatments were torturous.

My lunch went untouched. Eating was out of the question as was sleep for several nights thereafter. I have always, ever since that day, admired the mental and emotional strength required of Jean for the two years she worked there.

The same fire that so horribly burned those children also ignited within my wonderful wife, and those with whom she worked, a kind of love, a gentleness, a kindness, a softness, and at the same time, a toughness and a determination that I never imagined could all be present in a human being at the same time. Fifty years later I can still see those children in my mind and her moving among them, comforting them, helping them, healing them. And she is still my hero.

The metaphorical fire that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s good news of acceptance and love and kindness and compassion will inevitably burn some of us who wish it to be otherwise and leave us with scars, but it can also, if we let it, kindle within us a warmth that heals the hurts and pains that life puts upon not just us, but on all we meet.

May God grant to us all the blessing that allows us to be the flame that warms a cold and needy world.

**AMEN**