

“Forecasting the Future”

SCRIPTURE:

Luke 12:49-56

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law”. He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so, it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Jesus turns the attention of his hearers, disciples, and the multitudes alike, to a different type of question: That of his coming into the world (V.49,51), and “the present time” (V.56). The coming of Jesus, and the events of that “time”, were pregnant with meaning. He was not just another rabbi, not even another prophet. A foreboding fire flickered around his path, a fearful baptism lay ahead of him, the even tenor of life would turn to strife and anguish on his account. What do these things mean? And meaning they must have, just as clouds from the western seas means rain, and wind from the southern desert means heat. The advent of the carpenter of Nazareth is the most significant happening in all human history. But the majority of men and women, who can see meaning and connections and relationships in most of the phenomena in the world around them, and all the more so as their civilization becomes more sophisticated and rationalistic, are hypocrites when they look at Jesus Christ and pretend that they can make nothing of the remarkable facts of his life, death, and resurrection.

The beginning of Luke’s Gospel proclaims that Jesus will “guide our feet into the way of peace” (V.1:79). Near the end of the gospel, the resurrected Jesus appears among his followers and offers a benediction of peace (24:36). Within this literary framework, how might we understand Jesus’ statement that he brings “fire to the earth” (12:49), division and not peace? How can the one who tells a parable of reconciliation between father and son be the same one who sets parents against their children and children against their parents? Did he not bless with peace the sick whom he healed, “Your faith has saved you, go in peace” (7:50; 8:48)? Did he not teach his followers to bring greetings of peace as they traveled the country to share his good news (10:5-6)? Considering his own example and the testimony of his preaching, what can Jesus’ words of division possibly mean?

Preachers cringe at this selection appearing in the lectionary. Having more than once offered Jesus’ message of repentance and reconciliation as a healing balm for fractured communities and shattered lives, We find it hard to make sense of a teaching that claims for itself the outcomes of alienation and division.

Theologians over the centuries are themselves divided about the selection’s message of separation and conflict. Some have used Jesus’ words as a warrant for just-war theory in the face of very real clashes between and among the nations. Others have seen in the juxtaposition of parent and child a description of the division that occurs between believers and unbelievers when these are confronted by the blinding light of the gospel. Both of these views may be captured in the lines from Julia W. Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic”, in which Christ triumphant return “hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword.... He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgement seat.... His truth is marching on.”

Still others, influenced by ancient Greek notions of rationality or by the individualistic ideals of modernity, suggest a symbolic interpretation in which the parent-child conflict represents the division within the self between the mind and the passions, as rational thought seeks to overpower the impulses of sin.

Not only is the central theological message of the selection difficult to pin down, but so too are some of its details.

Is the fire that Jesus brings a baptism of fire like the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, burning in the hearts and upon the heads of numerous believers, enflaming them to mighty deeds of faithfulness? Is it, rather, the refiners fire, burning away the chaff of sin or the fruitless branches that do not bear fruit? Is it the fire of judgement, raining down from heaven upon the heads of God's enemies?

Perhaps the dilemmas and tensions of Jesus' saying cannot, and should not, be completely resolved. Instead, the selection 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. That is, it is not Jesus' purpose to set children against their parents, or parents against the children, but this sort of rupture can be the result of the changes engendered by Christ's work. Indeed, Luke's Gospel, in which this passage appears, includes the Prodigal Son, a parable about a younger son and his father, long estranged by the son's actions, who are reconciled at the end (15:11-32).

Even their reconciliation, however, bears the seeds of rupture, as their renewed relationship results in division between the elder son and the father. Jesus' teaching in our selection reflects that same reality. A ministry that reconciles long-standing enemies will inevitably tear apart relationships that depend on the old status quo.

Humankind does not always appreciate the gospels great reversals. We do not like it when those we deem undeserving receive the abundant grace promised to all. We want others to be punished for their sin, while we expect to be welcomed into the heavenly home (nobody expects to see their enemies in heaven). Jealousy, anger, desire for revenge, resistance to change these can consume us in the face of the gospel, to the point that we find ourselves antagonist against those whom Jesus welcomes.

Jesus' teaching also speaks to the reality of a kinship based not on family blood ties, but on a covenant of Jesus' blood. (22:20). Even among his own people, where he is known as "Joseph's son", Jesus becomes an outsider when he announces his mission from God.

And when his own mother and brothers try to get close to him, he defines the familiar ties that bind his true family to him: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (8:21). What ties believers together is not the covenant of lineage but the covenant of blood, poured out for those who find fellowship in the family of God. Jesus has not come to validate human institutions and their values but to initiate God's radical will.

In art and poetry over the centuries, Jesus is depicted in images ranging from the gentle shepherd to the conquering lamb. Even the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" includes both sorts of images – the one who is born "in the beauty of the lilies" is the same one who "hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword." In theological terms, these twin images represent Christ's mercy and judgement, born out of the reconciling power of God to defeat evil and sin. The passage suggests that – at the opportune time and under the impulse of God – when division begins, the gospel has begun to break in among us.

PRAYER:

O God, you loved the world so much that you gave your only Son for us. Increase and strengthen our faith and fix it firmly on the mystery of your Word made flesh, that we may triumph over all evil through Jesus Christ who reigns now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

The congregation that regularly makes a common confession of sin and hears an absolution directed to the real-life failures of this generation will be far more likely to know that, beyond Jesus' stern speaking to the crowd, there awaits an equally strong word of forgiveness and God's tender embrace. GO IN PEACE!