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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

August 14, 2022

Proper 15, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Jeremiah 23:23-29](#)

[Psalm 82](#)

[Hebrews 11:29-12:2](#)

[Luke 12:49-56](#)

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.

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This is a sermon about fire.

Fire! Brimstone! Red hot flame!

When was the last time you heard *that* from an Episcopalian preacher?

There's no way to make today's gospel passage a kind and gentle one. These are words of challenge, words of warning, words about the cost of discipleship and the disturbance that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings to the world. This is a gospel word that has no room for compromise, that calls us to follow one for whom the path of victory is the path of the cross.

If nothing else, this reading reminds us that the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't reducible to any conventional system of family values. Mothers turned against daughters and sons against fathers, nuclear families torn apart by the message of Jesus. It's an experience that was painfully familiar to the earliest generations of Christians, who might have heard these as words of comfort. How many of them had found themselves kicked out of their homes and their faith communities after becoming followers of this strange and radical man who spent his time with unsavory characters and ended up executed as a political criminal? For a Christian of the year 70, the message that Jesus had predicted this sort of thing must have been deeply reassuring, a reminder that the ties that make up the church go even deeper than biological family, that all those who have lost family or friends or possessions or prestige for the sake of the kingdom will find themselves rewarded. Maybe there's some comfort there too for us today as we realize that deep divisions aren't not something new to our society but something characteristic of human life and that there are times when the gospel doesn't paper them over but reveals them for what they are before they can truly be healed.

Now it is August, and though I hate to even bring it up, we are entering into fire season. Already in far north California we have seen wildfires this year. And right now in France wildfires are raging. We don't know yet whether this year will bring us evacuations or power cutoffs or smoke closures, as nearly every year has since the devastating catastrophe of 2017. But here in Sonoma County we know the power of fire, how a tiny spark in the wrong place at the wrong time can create a force that turns a meadow or a subdivision into a blackened field of ash.

That's what I think of when I hear Jesus talking about bringing a fire to the earth. Fire is powerful, and it's dangerous. It's because it's so powerful that it's also so fascinating. Even when we tame it and bring it into service—like the tiny, dancing flames on those candles at the altar—fire captivates us. We could replace those candles with a couple of nice, safe light bulbs. We don't because fire is a suitable thing to adorn an altar of the living God. It's real. It's alive. It's powerful. But because it's powerful, it's risky. It has the power to give us light and warmth, and it has the power to destroy.

Now fire shows up throughout the pages of scripture. It's a symbol of holiness and of the presence of God: think of Moses in the desert meeting God in a blazing bush, or of today's reading from Jeremiah in which God's word is said to be like fire. Think of the first disciples of Jesus receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in a rush of flame. It's a symbol of sacrifice: think of the smoke and flame of the burnt offerings that formed the heart of worship for hundreds of years in Israel's temple. But most of all, it's a symbol of two related things: destruction, and purification. The prophets tell us that God is like a consuming fire, like a refiner's fire that burns away impurities and leaves only pure gold behind. John the Baptist warns that Jesus will separate the good wheat from the worthless chaff and burn the leftover chaff in an unquenchable fire. And Paul writes that his work of building up the church will be tested with fire. Fire in scripture is consistently something that burns away what is not of God and leaves behind what is.

Beloved, we live in a world that contains an awful lot that is not of God. The gospel is good news beyond anything we could have imagined—but it's tough good news. It's the story of a God who has made a good world and who is constantly working to heal that world of its brokenness. But hearing that story

means we no longer have the option of ignoring that brokenness. It means we have to face the painful reality that things now are not how God would have them be, that the world is not how God would have it be, that we ourselves are not how God would have us be.

Maybe that's why Jesus urges us to read the signs of the times. We know how to interpret weather systems and predict approaching storms, but we can be oblivious to the systems of evil that dominate our world. We can see an approaching hurricane and board up our windows, but we see a world where billions starve while thousands feast. We see a society of anonymity and fragmentation and we retreat further behind our locked doors. We see a world full of poverty and violence and build weapons and jails instead of homes and schools. We see the greed and fear in our own selves and respond by scapegoating others—or by turning inward to despise ourselves and denying the image of God in us.

Jesus Christ offers us a way of healing. But it means we can no longer pretend we don't need it. If we can't see the signs for ourselves, God has given us one ultimate sign both of our brokenness and of our hope in the "baptism" Jesus talks about today: his suffering and death. We see our brokenness in this: when God comes into our world, we respond by crucifying him. And we see our hope in this: Christ is risen from the dead, and his rising is the down payment on the new creation that God is bringing into existence even now.

So the fire that Jesus comes to bring is a fire that refines as it destroys, a fire that melts off the impurities to reveal the gold, a fire that burns away the chaff so that the wheat can be used. It's a fire that none of us who have been baptized into

Christ can escape, one that is sure to leave us singed. But it is also a fire that leaves us healed.

This past spring several of us at Incarnation participated in a learning experience with Rose Hammock and Taylor Pennewell, two young Native leaders here in Sonoma County who help churches and other groups become better allies and neighbors to our local Native community. One of the many things we talked about was how the indigenous people of California historically stewarded the land using fire. Here in our region Southern Pomo, Coast Miwok, and Wappo people used regular low-intensity burns to keep the landscape resilient. When Anglo settlers began trying to prevent all wildfires, the undergrowth became too thick. But fire is an essential part of the life of this land. The good fire prevents the devastating fire. And after a burn, the green shoots poke their way up through the ashes like the risen Christ emerging from the tomb, like the new heaven and the new earth being birthed from the old.

Maybe it's the same way with our own spirits—we need the dangerous fire of God to burn away our own underbrush and refine out our impurities.

God is on a mission to restore all things, and we who are the church of Jesus Christ have joined in that mission. It is a costly one, a difficult one, and one that will not leave us unchanged. But it's the only way worth living.