

## Sermon August 17, 2025

Luke 12:49-56

*Today's gospel is difficult to hear, as Jesus reminds the people about the cost of discipleship. Following Jesus will cause conflict and division in their lives, sometimes tearing relationships apart. This warning includes internal divisions between families, as we are called to make choices about who to follow: Jesus or the expectations of society. The cost is too great for some, but the rewards are greater.*

"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 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?"

## Baptism by Fire

We all know the story. After Jesus stumbles out of the wilderness and rises out of the waters of baptism, he calls his disciples: "Follow me and I will show you how to catch people instead of fish." We tell that story over and over. We praise the disciples; want to be like them... to drop everything to follow Jesus. But what about the people they left behind.

What happened to their families? There was no social security, no food stamps... they relied on the money that these men brought in. When they dropped everything and left to follow Jesus, they left behind their wives and children and parents. We are told that Peter supported his mother-in-law, who was most likely a widow. And to make matters worse, Peter's brother Andrew left as well. Two families deserted, left to fend for themselves. If they had other brothers, they were left with the responsibilities of caring for their brothers' families, as well as their own. If there were not brothers, the women's prospects were very bleak. No matter what, these women and children must have felt abandoned and betrayed; shamed and hopeless.

"How can you leave," they must have asked, "to follow this prophet who claims to be from God but is asking you to break one of the most basic commandments: honor your parents."

It's not just Peter and Andrew. Jesus expected anyone who followed him to be willing to drop everything. Remember the man who wanted to bury his dead father? "Let the dead bury the dead," he told him. And he was willing to drop everything as well, at one point denying kinship with his own family.

And why? Why were these men and women willing to drop everything and follow Jesus? They did it all for faith.

It was Faith that took them out of the comfort of their homes and day to day lives. Faith that sent them out into a hostile world that didn't want to hear what they had to say. Faith that sustained them during difficult times, when everything seemed lost. Faith.

Jesus told us that his radical faith in God would plunge him into a baptism of fire. Plunge us all into the flames. He knew the stress and anxiety that he and his followers would endure, this is all very far away from our Christmas proclamations about peace on earth and goodwill towards all:

"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" he cries out. "No, I tell you, but rather division!"

Where is the good news? Where's the peace and joy and love? It's scriptures like this that makes us wiggle in our pews or want to get up and run away.

But don't give up.

Jesus speaks of a baptism of fire, a baptism that follows the cleansing baptism in the waters. But don't be afraid. A baptism is not only something you are plunged into. It is also something from which you emerge. You rise up renewed and revived -- with a new identity and a new life filled with God's Holy Spirit.

The baptism of fire is the birthplace of new life. But it takes faith.

In Hebrews we are reminded how God's people showed faith by passing through the Red Sea to freedom. The trauma of being trapped between an army and an uncrossable body of water was terrifying and seemed hopeless, and the only easy way out was a return to slavery... to their old lives. The way to freedom... the way to new life would only open to those who made a huge leap of risk-defying faith.

It's all about faith.

The good news is that we are not called to face the fire for no reason, or to take risks of faith just for the heck of it.

We are called to face the fire simply because that's what lies between us and the realization of God's purposes on earth

There is no way around – we are trapped between the two, just like the Israelite slaves were. But, if we keep our eyes on Jesus and follow his lead, the vision of the promised freedom, love and joy will give us the strength to push on through whatever threatens to engulf us, because that vision of a world where love and justice finally reign and all things are made one in God is the promise of the only life that is ultimately worth living and the only life worth dying for.

When Peter and Andrew told their families about Jesus, they must have also talked about the community of people following Jesus into this new life. They must have shown them how they care for one another, how their life together is a sign to of how all relationships could be in the world... of what might come if we believe the kingdom of God is breaking through this world. If we could live as though God is with us, here and now.

Peter's mother-in-law, his sisters and all his brothers, and the rest of the family may have been left behind, but they don't have to be. They are invited to follow Jesus too. And if they take that first step forward, they will stumble into the new relationships that are forming all around. And they will discover a new joy, a new peace, a new freedom from anxiety in the living reality. For every relationship lost in the name of Christ, we gain more siblings than we ever imagined we could have. When we choose to move forward in faith, we join a people who fulfill the promise to Abraham and Sarah of numbering more than the stars of the clear desert sky -- a community that spans the world... a sacred family to care for us and be supported by us. More people to love and be loved by than any earthly family could offer. We follow Jesus together, sisters and brothers in Christ.

We may live in troubling times. It might feel like the fires are surrounded us and the smoke is choking us. But as we emerge, we can be assured that we never travel alone.

That's a story that inspires me, instead of sending me running for the door. Perhaps the wounds we suffer following Jesus can, in God's redeeming work, become whole again.

Breaking and being made whole. That's the story of God's people. We see it in the stories that Hebrews retells for a new generation, of Abraham and Sarah; Moses and Miriam. We see it through faith, which reminds us of God's faithfulness in the past and of God's redeeming work, going on into the present and to be completed in God's time.

Thanks be to God!