



SAINT PETER'S CHURCH

Let the Fire of your Justice Come

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 18, 2019*

Isaiah 5:1-7

Solomon ruled over the entire realm from the Euphrates River to Philistia and as far as the frontier of Egypt. These countries paid tribute and were Solomon's subjects as long as the ruler lived. The daily provisions for Solomon were 180 bushels of fine flour and 365 bushels of meal, ten fattened oxen, twenty pastured oxen, and one hundred sheep; as well as stags, gazelles, roebucks; and fattened poultry. Solomon ruled over all the realms west of the Jordan River, from Tiphshah to Gaza. And peace reigned. Throughout Solomon's life, peace reigned in Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and everyone prospered under their own vines and fig trees. Solomon had 4,000 stalls for chariot horses, as well as 12,000 cavalry horses. The regional governors, each taking a month in turn, supplied the provisions for Solomon the ruler and all who came to his table. They never fell short in their deliveries.

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18

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| 1 Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; *
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim. | 13 The wild boar of the forest has ravaged it, *
and the beasts of the field have grazed upon it. |
| 2 In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, *
stir up your strength and come to help us. | 14 Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven;
behold and tend this vine; *
preserve what your right hand has planted. |
| 8 You have brought a vine out of Egypt; *
you cast out the nations and planted it. | 15 They burn it with fire like rubbish; *
at the rebuke of your countenance let them perish. |
| 9 You prepared the ground for it; *
it took root and filled the land. | 16 Let your hand be upon those at your right hand, *
those whom you have made so strong for yourself. |
| 10 The mountains were covered by its shadow *
and the towering cedar trees by its boughs. | 17 So we may never turn away from you, *
give us life, that we may call upon your Name. |
| 11 You stretched out its tendrils to the Sea *
and its branches to the River. | 18 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved. |
| 12 Why have you broken down its wall, *
so that all who pass by pluck off its grapes? | |

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith, the people passed through the Sea of Reeds as though on dry land. When the Egyptians tried the same, they drowned. By faith, the walls of Jericho fell after being encircled for seven days. By faith, Rahab the prostitute didn't perish with those who were disobedient, after she welcomed the spies in peace. What more can I say? There is no time for me to give an account of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, or David, Samuel and the prophets. These were those who through faith conquered nations, did what was just and earned the promises. They shut the jaws of lions, put out raging fires and emerged unscathed from battle. They were weak people who were given strength, became brave in battle and put foreign invaders to flight. Some came back from the dead to their spouses by resurrection. Others submitted to torture, refusing release so that they could rise again to a better life. Still others endured mockery, scourgings—even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, sawed in half, even beheaded. They were homeless, dressed in the skins of sheep and goats; they were penniless and given nothing but ill treatment—the world wasn't worthy of them!—and they wandered in deserts and slept on mountains and in caves and ravines. These are all heroes of our faith, but none of them received what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect apart from us. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside everything that impedes us and the sin that so easily

entangles us. Let us run with perseverance the race laid out for us. Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection.

Luke 12:49-56

“I’ve come to light a fire on the earth. How I wish the blaze were ignited already! There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! “Do you think I’m here to bring peace on earth? I tell you, the opposite is true: I’ve come to bring division. From now on a household of five will be divided—three against two and two against three, father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” Jesus said again to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say that rain is coming—and so it does. When the wind blows from the south, you say it’s going to be hot—and so it is. You hypocrites! If you can interpret the portents of earth and sky, why can’t you interpret the present time?”

Have you ever felt so passionate about something that you found yourself speaking about it with an uncharacteristic urgency and stridency? With a forceful tone and cadence that startled and confounded your listeners, throwing them off-balance and out-of-kilter? Perhaps your own speech might've even thrown you for a loop, too, surprising you with your own depth of feeling and commitment—surprising you with the strong voice that wells up within you when it comes to things that really matter.

I'm not really sure how characteristic the kind of speech we heard in our Gospel passage would have been to the historical Jesus. There's not a huge quantity of this scarier kind of speech in the Gospels—but the Gospels also do, in their totality, reveal a more harshly inflected message than what we find in our most familiar and well-loved passages. There's a certain militance that is detectable in some of Jesus' speaking and acting, and this tone can make us uncomfortable. It would be so much easier if we could just write it all off, so much easier if we could just frame this as some sort of aberration.

To me, at least at first, the kind of speech we hear from Jesus in today's Gospel feels a bit off-putting, distancing, even frightening. Maybe it does to some of you, too. It just doesn't quite feel like the Jesus we know and love. "Well, maybe he was just having a bad day," we want to say. "Or maybe his temper got the best of him, sometimes." "But this isn't who Jesus really is, deep down." We feel an impulse to cast ourselves as Jesus' public relations team, making excuses for this sour note amidst his otherwise unblemished record of sweetness and popular appeal.

And yet, words like these, words about fire, and division, and hypocrisy—are meant to command our attention, are meant to get us to wake up and try to make sense of them. They are meant to be a call to action. Because, you see, these words were spoken by a man who was consumed by intense desire. An intense and all-encompassing desire to see the world set aright, to see justice and healing for the suffering and the powerless, to see the dawning of God's Kingdom on Earth. Jesus wanted this kind of transformation more than anything. And he was single-minded and single-hearted in pursuit of this calling.

Most of us, of course, are not quite so single-minded. We want many things. Things that may sometimes be at odds with the deep equality and justice that are God's dream for the world. We'd like equality and justice, but we don't want them to hurt too much. We'd like it if we could all just "get along," without any big, difficult, disruptive changes. And we wish "getting along" was enough to make justice roll down like waters. But it's rarely enough. Justice demands much more from us. Jesus demands more from us.

Indeed, Jesus is seeking nothing less than the complete liberation of all oppression. And liberation is simply never going to be popular with everybody. Jesus certainly never set out to divide people. But his mission is more important to him than keeping people comfortable. And so his mission sometimes ends up being divisive, even though his mission is beautiful and holy. Still, it can divide us in this broken world of ours. We can't all find it in ourselves to want the beautiful and the holy and the just in such a single-minded way.

Indeed, Jesus so often stands in and speaks from a much more radical place than many of us are willing, or able, or courageous enough to occupy. And that tends to be a bit uncomfortable. As one commentator puts it: "Jesus' ministry has the disturbing effect of exposing human beings' deepest loyalties, and often showing them to be idolatrous, ridiculous, and even demonic."¹

And of course, not everyone welcomes such exposure. In Jesus' day, some were surely offended by Jesus' interpretation of Torah, by his estimation of who and what God thinks is most important. "Why is he always going on about the poor and the downtrodden? Who does he think he is? He doesn't know me and what I'm going through. Why should everyone else always get a leg up? What about me?"

Others in Jesus' day found his exposure of the truth to be incredibly liberating. Some heard Jesus' message and followed him, believing that his vision would lead to abundant life, eternal life. They left their homes and hometowns to follow this crazy, itinerant preacher. And it certainly tore some families apart at the seams. Sons and daughters abandoning all sense for this dream that Jesus was peddling.

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

For Jesus, of course, a false peace was no peace, a false consensus was no consensus.

The words of Jeremiah ring in my ears, as perhaps they rang in Jesus' as he was seeking words to tell God's truth.

Jeremiah says:

For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;

and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace.

Rather, the way toward real peace...the way toward a deeper, truer peace, toward God's peace often requires exposure of the truth, often requires reckoning with sins, often requires sticking together through all the complicated feelings. It's hard work to do this and it often causes divisions. And so it's work that we mostly avoid. But we avoid it at our own spiritual peril.

An essay I read this week puts it this way:

North American Christians...often suffer from a terrible affliction: We hate conflict and despise division. Far from interpreting these things as signs of Christ's presence, we see division and conflict as crises to be managed, contained, and extinguished. As such, [North] American Christians have developed a well-worn arsenal of avoidance strategies, which we deploy whenever conflict and division emerge. And we call this "peace."

But in our anxious attempts to conceal and contain conflict, we often succumb to the same hypocrisy on display in Luke 12: we fail to recognize that Jesus's ministry itself may be responsible for stirring up that conflict, bringing both heat and light to how sin [and death] are at work in our communities.

One of the remarkable "gifts" of conflict is that when it reaches a boiling point, the invisible social buffers melt away and one is left staring at a gaping chasm.

And of course, we don't like gaping chasms. They make us want to run and hide. We feel naked. Abandoned by our usual tools and resources. Unsure of what to do or where to turn. Utterly lost. And alone.

But the chasm also presents an opportunity. The gridlock of false consensus has finally been broken. Our differences are on the table. There is now an opportunity to do something new. An opportunity to see the world, and one another, in a new way. An opportunity to allow ourselves to be made anew. All that had been obscuring the truth has now been burned away.

You see, fire does much more than just destroy.

When fire rages through [a forest's] dry underbrush, it clears thick growth so sunlight can reach the forest floor and encourage the growth of native species. Fire frees these plants from the competition from invasive weeds and eliminates diseases and insects that may have been causing damage to old growth. Wildflowers begin to bloom abundantly.

Most young, healthy trees are resilient enough to survive a forest fire and will soon have a growth spurt, thanks to flames that thin light-barring canopies above. And scientists report young-growth forests recovering from fire are home to more diverse species, in both plants and animals.ⁱⁱ

If fire can do all of this for a forest, imagine for a moment what it could do for us? Perhaps fire is, in fact, the very best thing that Jesus could bring to our weary, wounded world. Perhaps fire is exactly what we need to clear the dense underbrush of all that divides us from one another. We need a refining fire that will leave us standing face-to-face, across the chasm, yearning to be connected once again to the beating heart of God's dream. That all might one day be free.

Let the fires of your justice come, O God.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5370>

ⁱⁱ <https://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/green-science/how-forest-fire-benefit-living-things-2.htm>