

When the World's on Fire (Luke 12:49-56)

I had a baseball game that day, beginning and ending my career as a catcher for *Dog 'n Suds* at the tender age of nine. I was nearsighted, and the mask didn't fit because of my glasses. Every time I turned my head, the mask moved slightly, as did my black nerd glasses, which made every pitch a funhouse adventure.

After I got home, following yet another losing game, and parked my orange Huffy with the black and orange striped banana seat, my mom met me outside and said, "There's been an accident."

Not knowing quite **what** to say, I said, "What do you mean? Who?"

"Jamie," she said. "He and Michael were playing with lighter fluid out in the woods, and Jamie was burned badly."

I remember wondering how it might be possible to be burned "goodly." But all I said was, "What happened?"

"I don't know, honey. His mom just called. I think he'd like to see you."

Jamie was a fairly sweet, if suggestible, kid who lived across the street from me. We were the same age, but we were in different third-grade classes and didn't hang out much together at school. At home, though, we roamed the neighborhood, built ramps to jump our bikes, played sandlot baseball and kick the can, and traded baseball cards.

Michael, a year older than we were, lived two doors down from me. And though my parents never said so explicitly, I got the impression that they thought Michael was a "bad kid." He always seemed to be in trouble, picking fights and swearing at adults. Last I heard, he was serving time for attempted murder somewhere in Indiana.

On the way over to see Jamie, I kept thinking about the bodily implications of being burned. I'd played with matches myself before, so I knew that fire hurt in an intense and memorable way. And the thought of someone close to me experiencing such pain not on a tip-of-the-finger-against-a-candle-flame scale but on a life-altering-torture scale seemed incomprehensible to me.

When I saw him, his leg was bandaged all the way up to his hip. He was whimpering. I didn't know what to say. Nothing seemed right. But his look said that he wanted something from me, some word, some bit of human contact from someone who didn't yet shave and still wasn't allowed to swear in public. So, I said all I could think to say: "Oh man, I'm sorry."

In the face of tragedy, the cries of a nine-year-old's heart, "I'm sorry," may hold a deeper meaning. It could be a heart-**breaking** acknowledgment of the harsh realities that lurk in the shadows, unsettling our sense of security.

After seeing Jamie's leg, I know one thing for sure: I've always had a healthy respect for the profound damage fire can do. Once fire gets loose, it feels like nothing in the world is safe. I have a picture in my mind right now of western states ablaze during wildfire season—hundreds of thousands of acres consumed in flames. Nothing's safe: businesses, houses, wildlife, and human beings. Fire threatens everything.

So, I've got to be honest: when I hear Jesus say, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" I don't get warm fuzzies.

Right? I mean, when fire shows up in the Bible, it feels like something really bad is going down.

When I think about fire in the Bible, I automatically associate it with the apocalypse, you know, the end of the world: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will

pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed" (2 Peter 3:10).

But even worse than apocalyptic fire raining down from heaven is the imagery of hell—with its burning lake of fire, a lake that burns with sulfur.

In the words of George Orwell, that's "double plus ungood."

Yeah, so when Jesus talks about bringing fire to the earth, maybe I'm just sensitive, but it makes me a little nervous.

But then I have to stop and remember that fire in the Bible isn't always a harbinger of doom. Sometimes it's just the opposite. For the Israelites escaping the Egyptians and then wandering in the wilderness—God's presence among them was manifested as a pillar of fire.

Fire in the Bible also acts as a purifier. John the Baptist says that Jesus will go to the threshing floor, gather up the wheat, and burn the chaff—that is, get rid of the bad stuff.

We know that fire purifies things, allowing growth. Nature needs fire, for instance, to burn off the bad, dried-up scrub, making way for new growth to flourish.

In an attempt to reduce the damage of those huge wildfires in the west, authorities often use what's called a "controlled burn."

Here's how it's

[described](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controlled_burn):

>Hazard reduction or controlled burning is conducted during the cooler months to reduce fuel buildup and decrease the likelihood of serious hotter fires. Controlled burning stimulates the germination of some desirable forest trees, and reveals soil mineral layers which increases seedling vitality, thus renewing the

forest. Some cones, such as those of lodgepole pine and sequoia, are serotinous, as well as many chaparral shrubs, meaning they require heat from fire to open cones to disperse seeds.

In other words, some forms of life literally cannot endure **without** fire. Fire as a purgative, a preparation for new life to flourish—**that** feels like what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel this morning.

Taken this way, the fire in our passage this morning is God's way of transforming the world—rendering it fertile for new life and new possibilities. It's God's way of laying the groundwork for a whole new world.

So, you can see why Jesus wished this fire were **already** kindled—because this fire is the necessary work God is doing to prepare the world for transformation. This isn't Jesus waiting to lower the judgmental boom, raining down the fires of hell on a

hard-hearted world. This is Jesus desperately yearning for the sweeping change necessary for a **new** world.

But we have to be honest: this new world and the growth necessary for it don't come without cost. After all, the pinecone has to die to make way for new life.

And Jesus is realistic about the hardships this transformation will cause:

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 (51-53).*

Now, don't lie. When you hear that, it's hard not to think that **Jesus** is the one who's causing the division, isn't it? I mean, he

comes right out and says just that, "Do you think I've come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

What are we supposed to do with that? What are we supposed to make of a Jesus who **causes** division?

Obviously, we have enough of that already, with too many politicians more than satisfied to tear down rather than build up. We don't need even **more** division. Shouldn't Jesus be the one that brings us together?

Excellent question!

This actually comes up regularly.

Say there's an abusive situation—it can be substance abuse related; it can be emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; it can be a toxic boss or a selfish friend; it can be just life with a narcissist.

But within these relationships, what happens when somebody threatens to tell the truth about the system?

What happens when one family member says, "I'm not going to stay silent any longer?"

What happens when one employee says, "I'm not going to be bullied anymore?"

What happens when one of the kids refuses to act like there isn't a huge problem that nobody wants to talk about?

Well, most of us know by experience—if not by training—what happens when someone challenges a system built on lies, violence, manipulation, greed, and intimidation. All hell can break loose, can't it?

The whole system, held together by a tissue of normalcy, can come utterly, irredeemably, apocalyptically undone—as if

somebody walked up and lit the whole thing on fire just to watch it burn.

But here's the tricky part: Is calling attention to injustice the same as setting the system on fire?

In other words, is it divisive to **name** the division?

To be honest about what keeps us separated, peering at one another over the walls we've built?

Stop to consider: Is it the truth **itself** that's divisive or the underlying **injustice** that's divisive?

In other words, is telling the boss he's a bully what causes division in the ranks—or was the division caused by having a bully for a boss?

You see what I'm saying, right?

Jesus isn't telling the truth to set father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, and so on.

No. When Jesus calls out injustice, people take sides. So, when Jesus says, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" he's saying that his very presence in a world of division and injustice will reveal where it is that people **already** stand.

When Dr. Martin Luther King helped organize the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, the ensuing violence and hatred weren't things he caused by getting African Americans to refuse to use the buses; because of the injustice of Jim Crow laws, the division that gave rise to the violence and hatred was already there. Dr. King just helped to shine a light on it.

Later, as Dr. King sat in jail in Birmingham, he wrote his now famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, arguing that, though speaking out seemed to lead to problems, he couldn't keep quiet—because keeping quiet allowed the injustice to continue. His white clergy colleagues weren't pleased with Dr. King. They argued that the civil rights movement invited violence. But Dr. King scoffed at the charge that what the civil rights movement was fighting for was causing the violence. He said that such a charge is "like condemning the robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery."

In essence, Dr. King offers a very polite, though sarcastically prophetic, eye-roll: "Yeah, this is **our** fault. The nightsticks, the dogs, the firehoses, the cross-burnings—that's totally on us. If only our people wouldn't act so needy, demanding to be treated like human beings, peace could finally be restored to our land."

And as painful as it is, Jesus says that for the fire of transformation to be kindled—the fire of God's change in the

world—we have to speak the truth about our current mess and the new world God desires.

We live in a world where division feels inevitable, but Jesus announces a world where divisions are healed—not by passively ignoring injustice but by shining a light on them.

We live in a world where people experiencing poverty and the unsheltered have to prove their worthiness **before** they receive what they need to live. But Jesus announces a world where our responsibility to one another isn't dependent on whether we think people deserve it but on the fact that Jesus loves everyone and wants them to flourish.

We live in a world where so many go to bed terrified—parents for their children's safety and children that their parents won't be targeted because of the color of their skin. But Jesus announces a world where everyone has a place to go to feel safe from harm, a sanctuary from the hatred and violence.

We live in a world that needs the fire of God's transformation, a new way of living together.

I buried a man a long time ago; I'd known him for years—Roy Shelby. He'd been in the Navy in the South Pacific in World War II, and he'd seen some pretty horrific things. It affected him for the rest of his life.

Roy used to say something I'll never forget. Whenever things felt out of control, he said there's one thing you be sure of: "The truth will stand when the world's on fire."

And for a man who'd actually seen the world on fire in the hellish seas of World War II, Roy knew what he was talking about.

I suspect that in Jesus' mouth, however, while telling the truth about the world that ***is*** and the one that's ***coming*** through the cleansing flames of God's transformation, he might have said: "If

God's at the helm, the truth will stand **because** the world's on fire."

—Amen.