

The Waters of Hope; Luke 12:49-56; Pentecost 10/Proper 15C

Second Presbyterian Church

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August 17, 2025

Theme: Fire can be for condemnation and restoration but fire given in our baptism is also life-giving.

Our second scripture reading comes from Luke chapter 12, verses 49 through 56. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and to those who are following him as he makes his way to Jerusalem. His words appear concerning if taken at face value. Listen to these words of Jesus and let us explore them together as God's beloved children.

Scripture:

⁴⁹ "I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵² From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ 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."

⁵⁴ 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. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. ⁵⁶ 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?

Sermon:

Fire is one of the most scary things we can encounter. It can be life threatening and destructive of property and hope. Some of you are very familiar with how fire can destroy if you were part of this congregation 20 years ago when the sanctuary burned. Others of you have experienced personal losses due to fires.

So why does Jesus say, *I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze?*

We have to remember that some of the people following Jesus weren't following him because they believed his message. They followed to find fault with

his words, his way of life, and his assertion of being God's Son. The Pharisees are probably the main recipients of Jesus' words of condemnation and warning because they were working primarily for the benefit of the status quo. Jesus came to upset the status quo that stifled so many. He understood his own baptism as not just one of water but also as one of fire.

Fire was a symbol of judgment and condemnation¹ from the Hebrew Bible. Is not my word like fire, says the Lord (Jer 23:29). According to Luke, Jesus knew his Hebrew heritage, and prophets such as Jeremiah were constantly reminding the Hebrew people about God's wrath for their disobedience. God's word was the fire of condemnation for those who didn't keep God's commandment of faithfulness.

Lately, it seems, we've heard of so many destructive fires, most notably in southern California where fires swept through forests until they reached areas of LA and destroyed everything in their path. Homes, businesses and livelihoods all gone. However, in a forest, fires are not all bad. "Forest fires help in the natural cycle of a [forest's] growth and replenishment."² Seeds are scattered, dead trees eliminated, and the forest floor is opened to the sun for new growth. The debris from the fire provides vital nutrients for rich, new plants to grow. A fire can be cleansing for a forest.

Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth..." (v. 49) Perhaps the fire to which Jesus speaks is not just for condemnation but also for cleansing. After all, Jesus did not come to promote the status quo. His end goal was not for the sake of harmony. He came to shake up the world and in many ways he literally turned the ways of the world on their head. Jesus comes as a helpless baby rather than a conquering king; he proclaims the meek will inherit the earth; and in the greatest paradigm shift, he dies so that we don't have to and conquers death in his resurrection. One scholar says this, "Jesus [did] not come to validate the social realities and values we have constructed. Such social realities and values have a propensity to seek a harmony that favors those who hold positions of power at the expense of those who are powerless and expendable."³ Jesus came to burn down the proverbial house and set things straight. He came to show that God's love and forgiveness is for all people, especially those on the margins.

Jesus life, death, and resurrection is a testament to the fire of cleansing which began at his baptism. One could say he is baptized by the fire of human sin at his death and his resurrection provided the cleansing of the human condition. The Good News is that he transforms this fire of sin into an unquenchable fire of

¹ Net Bible online commentary. Luke 12:49-56. Constable's Notes for Luke 12:49-50. <https://netbible.org/bible/Luke+12> accessed 8/15/25.

² "The Good and Bad of Forest Fires," American Forest Foundation's My Land Plan: The Woodland Owner's Resource website, <https://mylandplan.org/content/good-and-bad-forest-fires> accessed 8/15/19.

³ Richard P. Carlson, "Luke 12:49-56: Exegetical Perspective," 359-363, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 363.

eternal love for all people. And, when we receive his life-changing, cleansing fire of love we too can be transformed as he was. It is this cleansing and life-changing love which we receive in our baptism.

One might ask, why in the world do we choose to be baptized when Jesus says his baptism will bring division and not peace?

First, let's be honest. Baptism doesn't cause division and pain. Division and pain come from our own human tendencies for self-centeredness, greed, and power. Our baptism ushers us into a faith community, God's kin-dom of love, grace, and acceptance such that we are equipped with the love that enables us to let go of these basic human tendencies to prop ourselves up. Through baptism we are set free to let those needs go because we are baptized into unconditional love.

Another reason to choose baptism is something we lose track of in a world that is hyper focused on individualism. Baptism is never about us as individuals. It is about the body of Christ into which we are baptized. It is our collective baptism, our community on which we must focus. In baptism, God claims us...we do not claim God. God calls us by name as children of God to be part of God's family, the church universal. In baptism we become a part of all that was, is, and is to come. Together, claimed as God's beloved children, we grow in God's love and take that life-changing fire we've been given and proclaim it to the world. When fire brings division, we can face it together as the community of faith.

For Bobby, baptism is the promise we make to him and to Karleigh and Will—It is the same promise that was made at our own baptism—that this community of faith will surround and support Bobby to know God and God's love for him. He becomes part of our collective being, our Christian faith family. Baptism, faith, love...these are never individual things because we cannot do these things on our own. The ways of the world are too strong.

Fire can be extremely useful and good. Both fires of condemnation and fires of cleansing have their place in our world, because the world does need to change. Perhaps our baptisms can and should light fires under our behinds to bring about God's justice in the world. But, fires can get out of control, as they did in southern California. In that case, one of the only things that can put out a fire, is water. Water can also be cleansing, life-giving, restorative. In our baptism, water is all these things and more. Water is the source of our hope, our community, and the basis of our belief that God has called each of us by name as God's own.

See what love God has for us that we should be called children of God. And so we all are. Thanks be to the God of our baptism. Amen.