

Jeremiah 23: 23-29
Malachi 3: 1-4
Luke 12: 49- 56

The Uses of Fire
August 14, 2016
Mary R. Brownlow

When we take our long walks in England and Scotland, we sometimes came upon places where the heather had been burned. Last May we actually saw the smoke of heather on the hillside, burning quite close to our planned walk. And it was a dry, windy day, so that was a bit of a concern. Later we found out that a few men had gone out with a disposable grill, had a picnic, and then left the grill there. I hope they had a nice time, but their carelessness meant that a lot of people had to get to work to control the creeping ground fire. That's the scary side of fire. Normally, when I see a blackened stretch, I know that the burning has been done intentionally by the farmers. Fire is used to renew that land. Even forests sometimes need to be burned in order to survive. Those who manage the land see that destructive and creative power are closely linked. That started me thinking about the far-reaching implications of biblical fire.

It can be hard to bear the “scorching heat” of Jesus’ words in Luke’s Gospel. Is this the Prince of Peace speaking? He came to bring fire to the earth, a difficult and powerful baptism. Families will be divided, hypocrites revealed, creation forever changed. How can we sit quietly and comfortably while such words are being read? And how can they be part of the Gospel, the Good News of Christ?

Jesus was not the first prophet to speak scorching words of challenge. Jeremiah felt moved to be God’s mouthpiece of judgment on the leaders of Judah 600 years earlier. He said that there was no place to hide from the power of God’s searching gaze. The religious leadership is singled out as particularly guilty. The prophet Malachi spoke of the refining fire that would purify the Levite priests. And so God’s word acts like a fire, consuming and revealing human frailty, showing us what is real and lasting and true.

When we turn to the Gospels, and read them carefully, we have to admit that conflict seemed to erupt wherever Jesus went. I don’t think that he had some sort of need to cause a disruption for its own sake. Neither he nor Jeremiah were sociopaths. They took the risk of conflict so that people could hear uncomfortable truths, and perhaps find a new way to come to reconciliation with God. So Jesus did disturb people, and even caused pain at times, perhaps hoping that those who went through this process would be open to divine healing. Truth and clarity do disrupt lies and illusion. So there is a kind of holy disruption at work, which may lead to a deeper knowledge and peace.

Many of you have experienced some physical condition that makes you uncomfortable. Then, when you go to the doctor for help, you learn that some treatment is recommended that will make you *more* uncomfortable - for a while. But we often submit to these recommendations in order to get better. Then there are situations where we are distressed and need counseling. Part of the healing process might be confronting difficult things about our past, or our coping mechanisms. This is no fun – but there may be clarity and peace at the other end of the road to self-knowledge.

So when we hear that the Prince of Peace does not come to bring peace, but a sword – that we should expect division and trouble – we might begin to inquire what needs healing in our lives, or our society, or our environment. What *needs* disruption in order to be made right? What broken bone needs to be re-set, what infection needs to be cleansed?

What both Jesus and Jeremiah saw was the way that humans tend to fool themselves about the signs of the times. It seems that in Judah in 600 BC, the priests and prophets of the royal court relied on dreams as an avenue to sacred knowledge and discernment. Perhaps these dreams were a source of comfort, of reassurance for the people, who were threatened by powerful foreign enemies. Jeremiah senses that the people need stronger words, words of warning, words that will ignite a change of course. He was not a popular man, not with the powerful priests, not with the royal authorities, or even the common people. He tried to open their eyes to a difficult and unpopular vision of reality. He tried to disrupt their illusion of safety. We don't usually like to see Jesus in this tradition of agitated prophet. But it seems he had some things in common with Jeremiah. He saw clearly that his own ministry was headed towards a confrontation with those in power...likely a fatal confrontation, a cross as it turned out. He saw clearly that he lived in a time of spiritual crisis. His message put his listeners at a crossroads, at a decision point. And so fire is the image he chose to illustrate the power of the change about to move through the earth.

In mythology, in literature, in our own lives, fire is loaded with meaning. It is so basic to common everyday living – to cooking, to industry, to agriculture – and yet so mysterious. All of us can think of times when a fire felt so good: a campfire or a wood stove when we were cold. How many of you can remember that feeling? And how many of you can remember being burned by a campfire or a wood stove or an oven? Out most basic sensation of pleasure and pain are brought to mind by fire. All of us can think of stories in the Bible where fire played a central role: what are they?...*(such as appearing to Moses in the burning bush, a pillar of fire to lead the Israelites, fire on Mount Sinai when the law was given to Moses, the Holy Spirit on Pentecost as tongues of fire)*. God seemed to use fire when he really wanted to get people's attention. So it became a metaphor for the holiness and power of God.

So what does this kind of fire do? It has a number of uses. First, perhaps, it illuminates. It shows us things that had been hidden or disguised. Then, it burns off what is useless, as chaff was burned after the kernels of wheat were gathered. It purifies substances, as ores are heated to bring out precious metal. It can renew our interior landscape, as heather is burned on a hill. It can have a cleansing action, as the tools of a physician are sterilized with heat. It can ignite warm feeling of love, so that we care for our brothers and sisters. It can destroy, and it can renew.

But in all these ways, in all these uses, there is risk. We are swept up into levels of feeling and action that are new and uncomfortable. We may be forced to hear the pain and suffering of those close to us. We may even find out that we have been the source of that pain. And we may find that we are bound by cords of pain and love to family, to friends, to relations we barely knew before the powerful fire of God illuminated the web of connection.

Maybe there are other scorching words in the Gospel that we glide over too quickly. What about, "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you." This is almost as bad as hearing about divisions in the household. But reading them together brings some kind of perspective. Loving and forgiving distant enemies and foreigners can be a hypothetical exercise. It seems different when we have to forgive fathers and mothers and daughters-in-law and

sons. The deep resentments that build over slights, insults and neglect, perceived or real, are the source of so much division. We may need that fire of Jesus to illuminate the pain, to reveal the divisions which need so much love, so much healing.

So now I am reading that hard rhetorical question and answer, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No!” as a way to look at our privatized versions of peace. If the price of our happiness is another person’s pain, if the price of our peace is another person’s distress, if the price of our privilege is another person’s slavery, then Jesus comes blazing into my consciousness as a fiery truth-teller who divides. Jesus tells us the truth about our problem with self-centeredness, in all parts of our lives: in families and in society. I could choose to ignore the inequities, to turn aside from the deep problems, but Jesus’ words will call me back to see the world as it is, so that we can begin to work on the world as it should be.

Jesus uses the words of family relationship, and points us to acknowledge the larger family, God’s family, the one that is made up of all the smaller units we treasure. I have heard it said that Jesus came as our brother to help us see that we are all brothers and sisters. He illuminated the fiction that other people are disposable instruments in our individual quests for fulfillment. When we continue to operate under that fiction, we imagine that we can win peace. It is a false peace that is actually division, like that of a father against son, mother against daughter, siblings at war.

The 8 verses from Luke’s Gospel present an interpretive issue: do we treat the two halves as separate subjects? Is there a shift in the conversation when Jesus moves from “fire on the earth” and family feuds first, and then begins with watching for changes in weather second? Two different “pericopes” as the Bible scholars say? But let’s imagine them as one complete saying. If Jesus tells us that it really matters that we understand family ties correctly, in an almost global sense, then we would have to read the signs of the times. We take off the lens of “us and them” and brave the blinding truth as we look around us. So look at our human family and the signs of our times. What is your weather report on today’s politics, today’s economy? What is your take on the loud voices who claim injustice – do they move you to reach out to those suffering? Or do they annoy us and move us to ignore those who protest as loudmouths? Can we write them off as unrelated people who deserve whatever they get, while we nourish our own experiences of petty injustice? Can we really predict a peaceful tomorrow at the expense of the least of Jesus’ bothers and sisters?

Early in the 20th century the theologian Teilhard de Chardin, wrote: "Some day, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity we shall harness the energies of love. Then for the second time in the history of the world man will have discovered fire."

We might pray that such a fire burned in all of our hearts.

- Fire to illuminate our dark world
- Fire to burn off the dross
- Fire to renew the landscape
- Fire to bring out the purity of the gold and silver within us
- Fire to inflame people to care and to bless one another with all the gifts of faith
- Fire to purify our speech, as it did for the prophet Isaiah
- Fire to consume the altars of our false gods
- Fire to lead our people through the darkness, through the wilderness.
- Fire to warm us with God’s comfort and peace. Amen.