



“It Looks Like FIRE!”

12th Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, Aug. 15, 2010

Luke 12:49-56

*Prayer: Teach us, Lord, to walk by faith and not by sight,
that we may trust in You wherever You lead. Amen.*

There are times in the preparation of a sermon that the preparer is left wondering. In this case, the wonderment comes in wondering where the message of God’s love and God’s grace is in a text that boldly proclaims Jesus bringing fire to the world. It is a message that startles our senses, causing us to stop, to sit up straighter in our chairs, and to take note.

We teach our children how to be safe if their clothes catch fire: stop, drop, and roll. We go through fire drills at our places of employment to make sure we ourselves know what to do in the event of a fire: whether we **Rescue Alarm Contain Extinguish** or if we **Pull Aim Squeeze Spray**. Our houses are equipped with smoke detectors and fire extinguishers to keep our family and our possessions safe in the event of fire. We know also, that yelling “FIRE!” in a crowded movie theater when none exists could be grounds for our dismissal from the theater.

Through the centuries, people have been fascinated with fire and its properties. It has been used as a source for cooking and a source for heat, a source for light, and a source for destruction. The camp song sings “It only takes a spark, to get a fire going”. It is true – with the right conditions, a spark can indeed get a fire going – to the point of causing damage beyond control.

In recent days and weeks, we have seen and heard of fires going out of control. Wildfires in Moscow continue to burn, leaving many citizens struggling to breathe fresh air. Three Lutheran congregations in the Lower Susquehanna Synod have been impacted by fire: one as a shelter for those in the community that lost their homes to fire, two from actual fires. As the winds howled and the snow fell in February, Swamp Lutheran Church in Reinholds lost its fellowship hall and educational wing to an electrical fire. Miraculously, the sanctuary was spared. Earlier this week, lightning struck a church outside of York to the point the one hundred and sixteen year old building was destroyed and gutted.

While fire is damaging and destructive, there can be a positive side to fire. It can bring change. It can bring growth. Fire can challenge the assumed norm of what has been and can infuse life into a situation that had been dying.

When Mt. St. Helens erupted in 1980, the area surrounding it was covered in volcanic ash. Many thought the area was dead. In the thirty years since the volcanic eruption, the area has seen life return, often better than what had previously existed.

The fire Jesus talks about is not a fire of sitting around the campfire making s'mores and singing songs. Instead, the fire Jesus talks about is a fire that is life changing. The fire of Jesus' presence in our lives refines, changes, and shapes the areas in our lives needing refining, reshaping, and changing. When we experience the fire of Jesus in our lives, our lives are never the same again. Our families, our friends, our values, our beliefs change and are re-shaped because of this life giving fire.

This fire in our lives does not come when we want it. Rather, it usually comes when we least expect it. We may anticipate getting slightly singed, only to find ourselves getting burned – and perhaps scarred more than we anticipated.

Scripture is a double sided mirror for me. On one hand, scripture shows us the error of our ways. It shows us how we stray from faith to follow our paths, our desires, our directions rather than God's. At the same time, scripture points the way to God. Scripture shows us – and tells us not because of us, but in spite of us, how much God loves us and cares for us.

However, we do not get off "scot free" on this text. What makes our Gospel a challenge for us today is that it forces us to look at our own lives. Jesus' sayings challenge us to look at the inconsistencies within our own lives. We are challenged to look at what is important; whether we place priorities on the things that are insignificant and neglect the things that are important, or if we truly do place greater attention on those items in our lives that are truly important.

Looking at life in this way raises the question of what is truly important. For example, what is important for you might not be important for me. What is important for me may not be top priority for you. We listen to each other in hopes of finding a common ground. We may even call in another person to listen to make sure "our side of the story is heard." If our disagreement is not settled in the way we think it should, we may vent our frustration in ways that are not helpful, forgetting Jesus' words elsewhere in our Gospel today, *"Did you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided."* -- And we wonder why we cannot get along on even the "simple" things in life!

Earlier this week, novelist Anne Rice denounced Christianity publicly on her Facebook page. Anne Rice had been raised Catholic only to turn against the church before rediscovering her religious roots and returning to the Catholic faith. After wrestling with her understanding of organized religion for the past twelve years, and seeing teachings she did not necessarily agree with, Anne Rice believed the best approach for her was to simply walk away. She could not agree with the divisiveness in the church.

The church as a whole is indeed a divided place. Not on one thing or one area, but many things – sometimes to the point where it seems one can freely pick their choice of divisive topic of the day. Again, what is important to one person may not be important to another. This can cause great pain within the church, for what seems like a minor concern to one, may be a large concern to another. In these moments, no one can see the storm developing on the horizon – literally or figuratively.

And yet, that is the very thing Jesus warns about. I am not a meteorologist or a weather person by any means. I know there have been times where the lessons from elementary school science about clouds have returned to this brain. At times, I have found myself looking at the clouds and thinking to myself, “it looks like it is going to rain”. When the remnants of Hurricane Katrina came over Central PA almost five years ago, I remember how humid and warm the air was as I saw the clouds. The air contained a tropical current to it – something Central Pennsylvania does not usually experience. As the clouds passed by, I could not help but wonder what Hurricane Katrina had done.

Jesus warns us we know neither the day nor the hour when this fire will come. Luke’s images are varied throughout the Gospel: like a thief in the night, an unexpected guest arriving at midnight, the bridegroom arriving home from a wedding banquet. We know neither the day nor the hour, yet we are to be ready at all times, watchful, waiting, hopeful. We are not to be sitting around with nothing to do. Instead, we are to be busy with that which is important to Jesus: to love justice and to walk humbly.

The one thing we do know, regardless of our attempts to predict, regardless of the divisiveness we may experience in our life of faith or with our families and our friends, regardless of the misunderstandings we encounter because of our faith, it is by faith and through faith we come to know Jesus. In faith, as in life, we can be tested and tried. In those moments of being tried, we are granted healing, we are granted hope, we are granted a chance to change, to experience life as Jesus intends for us.

In those fiery moments of life, may the peace of Christ which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the one true faith, now and always. Amen.