
Through the Fire and Flames

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 15, Year C

Jesus said, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! ...Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" – Luke 12: 49,51

It was decision time.

Tongues of flame danced ever upwards from the roaring campfire. Young Sarah watched as her fellow Camp Skyline campers walked up to the blaze and dropped slips of paper into the fire. Counselors had asked them to write down something they wanted to give over to God: a burden, a habit, a sin, a fear. Sarah stepped forward. She watched as the paper fell into the fire, curling up into carbon, the inked words vanishing into smoke, a prayer floating heavenwards. She had made her decision. Sarah found faith in the flames.

When Jesus says, "I have come to bring fire to the earth," I wonder what images of fire comes to mind? What is this division Jesus promises? These are hard words of Jesus, jarring words that force us from the soft image of a peaceable shepherd cradling lambs in a meadow. In today's Gospel, we meet a Jesus who refuses to whitewash the rot of our world. The Kingdom of God does not wallpaper over our cracks. Jesus brings fire. Fire changes things. Fire consumes. It reveals what will last and what cannot remain. Fire forces a choice.

Scripture is full of such fiery moments.

Moses was keeping sheep in the wilderness when he saw it: a bush engulfed in flames, yet not consumed. He could have walked away, chalked it up to the desert heat. And yet, he drew near. Out of the flames, God spoke: "Take off your sandals. You are on holy ground. Go to Pharaoh. Lead my people out of slavery." From the flames, Moses received his mission; should he accept, he would find himself set against Pharaoh, against his adopted family, against his own self-doubt. A decision point in the desert.

Centuries later, three Israelite exiles stood before a Babylonian furnace. The command from Nebuchadnezzar was simple: bow to the golden idol or burn. They could have given in, made excuses: "Just this once, just for show." But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. They took a side, made a decision for God. And when they stepped into the furnace's flames, they found that they were not alone. A fourth figure joined them in fire, and fire could not consume them. Faith in the furnace.

Throughout holy scripture, fire represents the decision of faith. The nation Israel is led through the wilderness by a pillar of fire. Isaiah receives a hot coal on his lips, sealing him as one of God's prophets. Elijah calls down fire on Mount Carmel, forcing the people to choose between Baal and the Lord. So, when Jesus brings fire into this world, he brings the fire of choice, of decision, of faith. He warns us: this fire will not only test individuals, it will test households, communities, societies, even nations. Father against son. Mother against daughter. Citizen against citizen. Every yes to Christ also brings a no: no to false peace, no to empty tradition, no to the idols of comfort and control. That no can divide even the closest relationships, not because Jesus delights in conflict, but because the Kingdom Jesus brings does not fit neatly alongside every other loyalty we hold.

The decision of faith brings division not only to our external relationships but also to the internal world of the heart. We all carry many selves: the parts of us shaped by the Gospel, and those parts shaped by fear or pride, by the need for control, by the habits that keep us safe but small. Jesus comes with a refiner's fire, not to

destroy us, but to burn away what cannot remain in His Kingdom. Sometimes the fiercest division is between who we have settled for being and who Christ is calling us to become.

Here is the Good News: when we step into the fire, we do not step in alone. Moses found God's voice in the burning bush. The three in Babylon found a holy companion in the fiery furnace. And at Pentecost, the disciples who had been hiding in fear suddenly found tongues of fire resting on them, filling them with words they did not know they had, courage they did not know they carried. That fire did not consume them. It consumed their fear – and it sent them out to proclaim Christ to the world, and the fire spread.

So yes, these are hard words from Jesus. They remind us that the Gospel is not an idle identity or a badge of honor. The Gospel is a claim on our very lives. Taking God's side will mean losing certain loyalties, certain identities, certain comforts. Sometimes it will divide us before it unites us.

But it will also mean gaining the life that really is life.

So, when the fire comes, when the Kingdom stands before you in all its urgency, what will you do? Will you let God burn away what cannot remain, even if it changes your relationships, even if it changes you?

The One who calls you has already taken a side, the side of mercy, justice, and resurrection life. And He is inviting you to join Him in the fire. Amen.