

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Can You See the Signs?”

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Luke 12:49-56

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When Burt asked me to preach, I was excited about the opportunity until I looked at the lectionary passage for this Sunday.... Jesus said to his disciples, “I have come to bring fire!” I knew two things...one, why Burt took the week off and two...it might actually be possible to be stoned the first time I preach at DaySpring.

Who wants to preach on this? I’d much rather have “I’ve come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly.” Or “I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.” Those are “nice” passages. We like our nice, gentle Jesus who has come to save the world and bring love and peace. Whereas, we like to ignore the Jesus who turns over tables in the temple in a fit of rage and calls the religious leaders of his day a brood of vipers.

This passage brings us face to face with the Jesus who makes us uncomfortable. And to be honest, that’s what He does to most people who encounter Him. Jesus was a controversial figure. He ate with sinners and tax collectors, broke the Sabbath, and talked to all sorts of women. He might as well have been a regular at the local bar and hung out on the corners of prostitute row. When Jesus taught He never considered the right PC words to use. Jesus knew how to rock the boat. As with most revolutionaries...it got Him killed. So what does that mean for us who claim to be His followers?

According to the passage in Luke it means we have to endure His fire. If we are followers of Christ then we shouldn’t be surprised when we hear Him say, “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”

When we read these “I have come” statements we need to sit up and take notice. These statements are purpose statements for Christ’s ministry. They give us insight into why Jesus came. What is this fire that Christ brings? When we think of fire in the Old Testament we recall the prophecies of judgment or the plague of fire pouring down on Egypt or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But fire is not always used as a form of judgment. Fire can also be used to purify. The fire that Jesus has come to bring is a fire of purification.

At DaySpring we always talk about this journey that we are on and how it is a journey of transformation. The journey allows us to begin to live less out of our “small self” and begin to live more out of our “true self.” Over the past several weeks the lectionary has taken us through difficult passages that have beckoned us to Wake Up, to Watch Out, and Be Prepared. We’ve seen Jesus on His journey to Jerusalem where only the cross waits for Him. Even in today’s passage He refers to His death as a baptism that He must undergo. Christ expresses the torment He is experiencing as He waits for the inevitable. It doesn’t take long for us to realize that this journey is not going to be easy, because true transformation means we have our own baptism of fire to

endure. It's going to take more than just sitting in the pew Sunday after Sunday. The Scripture clearly tells us that to follow Christ means that we must die. We must pick up our own cross and carry it daily. This will look different for each of us, but if we are going to profess our faith in Christ, then we have no choice but to choose death.

When we encounter Christ, we are forced to make a decision. We are either for Him or against Him. Following Christ is not about a family tradition. It's not even about a denominational commitment. A decision to follow Christ means that everything else, including ourselves, becomes secondary. To be a follower of Christ takes all of our heart, all of our mind, all of our strength. When it comes to Christ...it's all or nothing. How can we think that our comfortable lifestyles can be repayment for the cross? Christ did not come to die for us to be comfortable. So if we find ourselves being comfortable in our journey of faith, then that's the first sign that something has to change.

Christ asks us, "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?" We've been taught to think that...from the angels' proclamations at Christ's birth to His departure.... Peace is declared.... We even share the peace of Christ here every Sunday. But maybe the peace that Christ promises isn't the peace He's referring to here. See, we can have that "peace that passes all understanding...which guards our hearts and minds" and not have peace on earth. It's like freedom. True freedom in Christ comes from Christ within us...not from a government or any other institution or person. Christ is warning us that we will not have peace on earth but division. Christ's coming brought division.

In the passage it says that there will be division...division between father and son, mother and daughter, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. I'm not sure this goes very well with the family values we usually associate with Jesus. Some of us have been fortunate and come from families with a strong Christian background. But I would dare to say that most of us have family that doesn't get our faith. It could be that you are the only one in your family that has a relationship with Christ. Then for some of us, it's not that our family doesn't believe, but they don't understand how Christ could call us to practice faith in the way we do. How can God call a woman to preach? Why would God call my granddaughter to work with the poor? I don't want my son to be a struggling minister. We must remember that for some of us the Body of Christ is more of a family to us than our biological family. The Body of Christ might even be the only family some of us have. May it be possible that Christ is calling us to reconsider how we even see family?

Matthew gives us the account of when Christ's mother and brothers want to speak to Him and Jesus responds, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Then He points to his disciples and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Does that imply that this purification process must take place in community? Could it be that in the midst of division the world should see us unified?

As the Body of Christ we are called to be set apart. We are supposed to be in this world but not of it. That means we are supposed to be different. I don't mean an obnoxious different. More of a subtle in the course of the day as we interact with others there should be a difference. In the way we choose to spend our time and money--the choice to live simply and embrace our world

with love. This is the difference of a life transformed by a journey of fire. Luke seems to say that our decision to follow Christ and embrace death will either attract people or repulse people. When it repulses others, it will cause division---between countries, between faiths, between communities, and even between family members.

After Jesus has made such shocking statements to the disciples, He then turns to the crowd and starts talking about the weather. I'm sure this left the disciples scratching their heads wondering what Jesus was doing. I know when I first read the lectionary passage I thought it was a misprint. To go from bringing fire and division to practically complimenting the crowds on their skills in meteorology. What does the weather have to do with purification? But then it comes, the word no one ever wants to hear...especially from Jesus.... Hypocrites!

In this case, it wasn't that they were saying one thing and doing another. It was more like...how can you be so observant of the weather, yet so blind to spiritual matters? The people's livelihood depended on the rain. Therefore, they had become very good at predicting and understanding the weather. But Jesus had been with them and among them teaching and performing miraculous signs and yet...they didn't have a clue who He was or how significant He was to their livelihood. I wonder how often we do the same thing. We watch the weather, the stock market, and interest rates. We plan our lives around what we think will happen. But do we hear the cries of our church in Sudan? Do we understand how the church of the Southern Hemisphere is radically changing the face of Christianity? Or that some of the next generation of Muslim leaders are at Baylor University? And Jesus asks us, "How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?" Seems like it's possible to be religious and not see what God is up to.

Just as we like to ignore the non-PC Jesus, we also like to choose to be blind to things. But maybe we don't even know we're blind? If we are blind, which Luke implies that we are...then how do we see? How do we get eyes that allow us to interpret the signs of the time? Maybe this is how the fire that Christ has brought ties in to our ability to read the signs.... Is it possible that we must first endure the purification of fire before we can see...before our eyes can be open to what God is doing in the world? The early church fathers thought so...they believed that one had to go through a season of purification before one could receive illumination.

If we are to see God at work in this world, then we must surrender ourselves to the fire of transformation. This requires us to be open---to who we really are and to those around us---we are called to be in community with God, His Church, and the world. This requires us to let go---of expectations of ourselves and of others---of fears and worries---of all those things that so easily bind us to our "small-self." It requires us to trust---in who God is and what He does and does not do---in ourselves---and in others. It requires us to love in ways beyond us---in ways we can't even imagine---in a way that makes us risk being hurt. When we make this inward journey we find that we do not like who we are, yet we also find that there's more to us than we thought. We will start to be moved by those things that move the heart of God.

Richard Rohr says, "The most courageous thing we will ever do is to bear humbly the mystery of our own reality." When we begin to read the signs of the time...when we wake up to see Christ fully present in us and in the world we can embrace both the redeemed and not quite yet redeemed qualities of ourselves. If we are able to do this with ourselves, then is it possible we can

do this with the world? I mean, is it possible for us to see the world differently...in the way that God sees it...His beloved creation in the process of redemption? What signs do you see? One sign I see is globalization. It has not just happened to us economically; it's happened to us spiritually. It has happened to us as a church. Think about it. The Global Church is here. It's even made its way into our congregation. What is God doing? Can you see it? We are connected to Toliver Chapel across town; we are connected to the church in Kansas City and LA, and in Romania, and in Indonesia, and in India, and in Bangladesh, and in Australia, and in Ethiopia, and in El Salvador, and in Columbia. What happens to the Body of Christ here in Waco or across the ocean affects what happens here at DaySpring. We need each other. We have so much to learn from each other. The Global church is not looking for us to lead them but to walk with them and support them. The Global church doesn't need our Gospel...and though our resources might be helpful...what they really need is us.

One thing we must not forget. This inward journey spirals back outwards. This transformation that is occurring inside of ourselves isn't just for us. It's for the world. We need to use our new eyes to interpret the world, to allow us to see the world as Christ sees it. This will empower us to engage our world. This transformation by fire should change the way we interact with those sitting next to us this morning. It should shape our encounters with strangers at the grocery store and the homeless on the street corner. It should open us up to show hospitality to foreigners and compel us to embrace our sister churches around the globe. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "If I want to see truly I must be willing to look beyond the appearance of things into the depth of things, into the layers of meaning." "The kingdom (of God) is to be found in the most ordinary details of our ordinary lives. It may be hidden, but it is there, if we will look not once but twice."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus includes, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" in the Beatitudes. I think that verse summarizes what the text is trying to tell us today...we must be purified to see God and understand His work in the world.... That's important because when Jesus summed up the commandments he told us to...love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength...and love our neighbor as ourselves. Christ has come to bring fire to purify His church in order that we can love Him and then in turn love our neighbors.

The irony of this sermon is that its lesson was already taught through the children's sermon the last two weeks....remember...the vase which represents inward purification and transformation which prepares us to use the towel and basin to serve the world. Through the fire of transformation our hearts are shaped and molded to love God and see who needs to be served.

When we can truly open ourselves up to see the reality of who we are and who God is, then the world becomes a different place. After a while we can read the signs like watching the clouds to predict the weather. God is still present teaching and performing miracles. Christ needs us to surrender our hearts to the fire of transformation in order that our eyes can see and interpret the signs of our time.