

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Fires Blazing

Luke 12:49-56

August 17, 2025

In the Gospel reading for today, there is a saying of Jesus which can be quite startling and can challenge us. It can even be scary. Walking with his disciples he says, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze!" What fire is he talking about? And what is the meaning of these words today, this fire Jesus brings?

It's important to say from the beginning: these are not the words of a Messiah who's ready to smoke some sinners. He's come to save and transform them. Jesus came to bring the Gospel, the good news of God's love for each one of us, and God's desire for a people on earth to bear witness to God's love through their worship and their way of life. He is telling us that the Gospel is like a fire because when it erupts into the human heart, it transforms the old frames of living, challenges us to break out of individualism and selfishness, refines us out of slavery to sin and death to new life in the Risen One.

The Gospel does not leave things as they are. The Gospel is not an extracurricular activity added to a list of other affections or allegiances we may prioritize. The Gospel provokes, changes, invites conversion, prompts passion. Wake up! Jesus says over and over. Be alert. Be awake. There's a readiness, an eagerness, an energy fueled by awe and joy that transforms the person growing in faith. Jesus asks, "Did you think I came to bring peace?" We say, "Well, yes, actually, that's what the angels were singing at Bethlehem."

Jesus is the Prince of Peace, but the peace of the gospel bears within it a kind of restlessness that sets us in motion and drives us to the lives of our brothers and sisters. It is like a fire; it warms us with God's love, and burns away our apathy and selfishness; it enlightens the darkness of our lives, and consumes the false idols that diminish our lives and what God intended them to be.

Fire is the sign of the divine presence. In the preaching of John the Baptist, it is purification and refinement. For prophets like Jeremiah, it is the power of God to effect change in the face of tremendous resistance. It is the symbol of judgment, yes, because judgment is God's holy answer to unrighteousness, idolatry, and injustice that cause great suffering and cannot exist in God's presence.

The sacred fire is a dynamism of a life that is truly alive. The one who said somewhere else, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" puts the same promise in bolder language here, "I have a fire, and I want the whole world burn with it, too."

Like the prophets, like Jeremiah, Jesus feels the flame within him. By the 12th chapter of Luke, the urgency of his mission is burning within him. He's like Jeremiah who was trying to

convince the people of the urgency of responding to God, and Jeremiah was frustrated by it. Jeremiah was at witt's end by it. He prayed, "God, I'm doing all that you asked, I'm preaching all you command me. But no one is listening. I want to stop. I want to give up and give in and just go back to my quiet life. But when I say, 'I will not mention God, or speak anymore in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."

Amongst a people who would not heed his word, the prophet felt the fire burning in him. Amongst a people sleepwalking through their lives, Jesus felt it too—the fire of God burning in his bones. He desires you to feel it as well--somewhere in your life to have a fire burning in your belly.

Jesus looks around and sees people who are alive but not really living. To really live is to live in, with, and for God who made you, who knows you, and who loves you. The fire Jesus wants to kindle is an urgency and transformation of lives and communities. God's active presence in the world is here. No wonder he is so eager to strike the match.

The pastor Eugene Peterson felt it: a hunger for something radical—something so true it burned in his bones, a longing for God that ignited a ferocity in his soul. He learned it from a professor, of whom he said, "He was one of the first people I encountered who really lived what they believed, and when you encounter someone like that, you wake up." And so it goes with the Gospel. One person to another, one act of faithfulness to another, one act of kindness, or courage, or truth-telling, or love. Each a spark of the flame of the Spirit setting the world ablaze.

God desires us to wake up, that we may live, to live for one another, for God and for the world's well-being. But know this: the sacred fire can hurt. It will be costly. A refining fire purifies us from our sins which cling so closely and from attitudes and thoughts which are not of God and yet can be firmly entrenched in our perspectives, our politics, our cultural inheritances. God's refining fire, when we submit ourselves to it, can be quite painful. We can find ourselves even being separated from people we've known and love. This is not God's desire, but it is a consequence sometimes of God's greatest desire. A consequence of total allegiance to the Gospel is sometimes great personal pain, sometimes tremendous suffering. We are not alone in such suffering. Many who have gone before us have suffered far worse. They are the great cloud of witnesses who surround us and urge us on as we follow Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. I'm struck everytime I read Hebrews which says, "The world is not worthy of them."

And we are not alone in this suffering in a different way. When we grow in the Lord, we have eyes to see the pain of others and feel empathy for others. We may find ourselves burning with anger at the violence done to innocent victims, injustices systematized by the powerful. This, too, is the flame burning within the heart of Jesus, a fire of justice he desired to sweep through the citadels of power and violence.

And he, of course, suffered as well. The fire would consume his life. He would be baptized into his suffering, death, and resurrection. By his baptism into death, we are set free to walk in him and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And in the Spirit, Jesus invites us to rekindle the flame of faith so that no longer is our faith a secondary matter, but is unleashed to do its holy work in us. Let the fire of the Spirit burn, that we may have passion for prayer and for love and for the joy of faith. Let us not drag ourselves along with weariness and habit, downcast face, lament on our lips, and boredom in our hearts.

Let us too be inflamed with the fire of God's love. Let us pray that born in us a desire to love God with heart, soul, mind, hands, and feet. Let us pray for the desire to share the love of God to all the world so that each person may discover the tenderness of the Father and experience the joy of Jesus who enlarges the heart and makes life beautiful.

May God take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

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