



Date: August 14, 2016

Title: "Faith on Fire"

Scripture: Luke 12: 49-56

Description: Jesus said he came to bring fire on us. That sounds harsh. What would that mean? And what would it be like?

Faith on Fire

The Greek god Prometheus felt sorry for us. He had shaped us from the mud. Over the objection of Zeus, he made us able to walk upright like the gods. But we still seemed a little pitiful to him. We were scratching around on earth, dim, stagnant and eating raw meat. We needed something to get us moving in the right developing direction. Fire.

Absolutely Not

Prometheus wanted to bring fire to the earth. He thought if he gave humans fire we could better ourselves, start a civilization, make him proud.

I said no!

Zeus refused to give the divine stamp of approval.. Zeus thought we were already too full of ourselves. He thought if we had fire we would turn away from the gods and start worshiping ourselves.

So Prometheus went behind Zeus' back. He stole fire from Mount Olympus, brought it to earth—and it worked. We started civilization. But Prometheus got caught and Zeus tied him to a rock and had an eagle eat out his liver every day for eternity. Prometheus was willing to be punished eternally so that we could have fire and start civilization. Thank you, Prometheus, for your sacrifice.

Fire is a good thing, right? But when Jesus talks about bringing fire down on us, it sounds threatening. It sounds like a rant more than a blessing.

Jesus had been under a lot of stress lately. He'd been hanging out in Galilee and now he is traveling toward Jerusalem. Crowds continue to gather and grow wherever he goes...because, well, he's a pretty cool guy. He's been healing folks along the way. Demons are cast out. He's even trending on Twitter. Hash-tag #JesusIsAwesome. You can almost imagine him in Chuck Taylor shoes, and a cup of locally roasted coffee in hand.

Jesus has been teaching as he goes. Earlier in chapter 12 of Luke, Jesus' teachings feel rather reassuring and cozy...he tells his followers not to worry, to consider the birds of the air and lilies of the field, reminding them that they are precious in God's sight. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) This is my kind of Jesus...with his gentle hipster ways and kindly prose. But then today's passage...it feels like Jesus has had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and oh how I wish it were blazing already! Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No! I've come for division!"

What happened to considering the lilies? And our preciousness in God's sight? I mean, Jesus! Where did this angry guy come from? Perhaps he needs to sit down with Dr. Phil. Or at least have more coffee (decaf might be a good idea).

Jesus wants to bring fire down on us. What kind of fire would it mean? And what effect would it have?

Think back to Moses' encounter with the burning bush. That was a fire that burned, but did not destroy. The burning bush fire created conflict (our translation of the Bible uses the word "division") as Moses stirred up a serious confrontation with Pharaoh. But it led to liberation and freedom for God's people.

In the book of Daniel, three young Jewish boys, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego find themselves facing execution by an angry King Nebuchadnezzar because they would not worship the king's idol. They are thrown into a fiery furnace of blazing fire and yet are left unharmed. When the king looks into the blazing furnace, he doesn't see the destruction of the three boys. Instead his eyes are opened to the presence of God. This was a fire that burned, but didn't destroy.

The prophet Malachi refers to God the refiner who sits by the fire. (Malachi 3:2-3) We don't have a whole lot of professional refiners at the mall these days. But in ancient times, a refiner, otherwise known as a silversmith or goldsmith, did show up on a lot of street corners. The process of refining removes all the impurities from the precious metal...to enable it to be molded and shaped free from things that deform the metal and lessen its value. It is a fine art, which requires careful attention. The refiner is attentive and deliberate, carefully watching the silver as he holds it in the fire until the silver is purified. A refiner's fire burns, but doesn't destroy.

There is a story of a woman who visits a silversmith. She asks him how he knows when the silver is refined. The silversmith responds, "when I can see my face in the silver." God is the refiner, carefully holding his gaze on each of us as he refines precious metal until it reflects his own image back at him.

Fire isn't a bad thing. Maybe we could use a bit of fire. Even if it makes us a tiny bit uncomfortable. Jesus came bringing a sword, not a butter knife. He's not a glo-stick;

he's a fire. Are you willing to keep your faith if your faith burns you? What if sometimes your faith makes you wince and cry "ouch"? You okay with that?

The world today is a nice, beautiful place, with liberty and justice for all. Am I right? The world could use a tune-up, a few adjustments here and there and Jesus could certainly help with that. Then all things would indeed be bright and beautiful. Wrong! Jesus didn't come to bring fire on a nice world, but to shatter the devastating death-dealing systems that we accept as "the way things are."

Maybe that's the first effect of this fire Jesus brings: to help us see things the way they really are. That may burn, because we have a vested interest in *not* seeing things the way they really are.

In my office, I have a picture of me and two of my kids. The kids, now in their late twenties, were in middle school when the picture was taken. You can do the math to figure out how much younger I was then. I removed the picture last week, at last accepting that the kids don't look anything like they did fifteen years ago. I, myself, however, have not changed at all. I look exactly the same. Most of us have blinders that prevent us from seeing things as they really are.

Truth is, I see things the way that makes things work out for me. And if there are things that don't make me look good, or things that make me a little uncomfortable, the easiest thing is just to not see them.

If I have a lot of people around me that see things like I do, we become blind to the same things. Group blindness is really powerful, because we aren't even aware that it's blindness. Without knowing it, we become devoted to remaining blind to the same things.

This past year, several women at the University of Tennessee have reported being sexually mistreated by members of the athletic department. Athletes, coaches, trainers—all levels over several years. The number of women and the number of incidents imply a culture of acceptance of sexual misconduct. Here in Bulldog country, you'd say, "I'm not surprised."

But where I grew up, in the heart of Big Orange Country, in the shadow of Neyland Stadium, word is out. "It is just not true. Those women are exaggerating. At most, they're just isolated incidents. Rocky Top, you'll always be..." Among Big Orange fans, Tennessee remains athletically excellent and morally pure.

You might say, "When they want things to be a certain way, they'll see things that way, no matter how blind they have to be." Get us together with others who think alike and are blind to the same things, we can become very certain that the way we see things is the way things really are.

Then someone comes along and speaks the truth. And truth burns like fire. Not just in Big Orange Country, but in the manicured and pedicured suburbs of north metro Atlanta.

What if Jesus didn't come to our community and say, "There, I got that working just about right. Now on to the rest of the world. Maybe they'll use Duluth and Suwanee and Johns Creed as an example to follow. What if Jesus came here, right here among *us* and said, "This has to change."

First of all, it would burn like fire. And the other first of all, some people would not like it. It would divide people, stir up controversy, make people upset with each other. Even in the same households, even among family members. Those who benefit most from the status quo are likely to fight tooth and nail to oppose anyone who tries to change things. And they will adamantly keep their blinders firmly in place to avoid having to see the reality of injustice.

He insisted that they take their own blinders off so they could see that things were not the way God intended. I think that's at least a place for us to start. Whatever our background, whatever our place in life, Jesus challenges us all to take off our blinders and at least see the pain, the poverty, and the suffering that is so prevalent all around us. Make no mistake: we are surrounded by hurting people. And somehow our worlds conspire to make us blind to them. But all of us, each and every one of us, can ask God to open our eyes to reality. Let Jesus light a fire.

When you see dark clouds in the west, you say, "Afternoon thunderstorms!" and you're right. We will cancel a picnic, for example; we will accept that a rainstorm destroys our picnic plans and try something totally new, like an afternoon at the movies. Jesus shakes his head, exasperated. "How come you can do this with the weather," Jesus asks, "but you can't do it with your lives?" Let Jesus light a fire of truth in you.

I love my life. But my life needs to change if it's going to be the life God has in hope for me. That sounds threatening. Because it is.

Faith on fire burns, yes; but it does not consume. It hurts sometimes, but it does not kill. Remember having braces on your teeth? Your faith hurts like braces hurt. Those rubber bands—ouch. How many of you now regret that you once had braces? I know. They hurt, but, Lord—what a beautiful smile in the end!