

Sept. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019 Caution: Expect Division! Not Peace.

Don't you just love Christmas time? We love the great Christmas hymns. "Hark! The herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled." We love thinking of Jesus, cute little, Jesus, lying in a manger. You know the scene. The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes. The shepherds are out in the fields nearby, when suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts breaks the peace out on the pleasant pastures, bursting into jubilant song, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to men on whom his favor rests." We love the prophecy of peace from Isaiah. **"To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."** (Isaiah 9:6) We have nice Christmas decorations with that verse on it that we can't wait to put out in our homes when December rolls around. We love the Christmas story from Luke 2 with all our hearts, and for good reason.

But just like with so many other things, we tend to have selective hearing. We remember passages we like and forget the ones that are a little scary. How many of us have decorations with this prophecy about Jesus? **"His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."** (Luke 3:17) The prophecy about Jesus bringing unquenchable fire doesn't necessarily set the same mood as the one about the Prince of Peace.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus speaks in stark and dramatic words, to perk up our ears so we can't miss what he's saying. **"I have come to bring fire on the earth..."** The verb he uses is the normal verb for "throwing," like a spear or a rock. Jesus is picturing himself as the one who casts fire on the earth, basically a flamethrower! **"And how I wish it were already kindled!"** he says. Sheesh it sounds like Jesus is out for blood and vengeance! **"Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?"** Well yeah, Jesus! Don't you know what Isaiah said? You're supposed to be the Prince of Peace? **No, I tell you, (not peace) but division!** This statement is so startling we don't know what to think! Jesus brings division not peace! Are all our beloved Christmas songs ruined? Do we have to strike the word "peace" out of them all? How can this possibly all square up?

In four brief verses, Jesus takes the opportunity to give a warning in dramatic fashion. This is a warning far stronger than just plastic caution tape. Jesus uses a statement so unexpected that it can't help but grab attention. It's meant to clash against your eardrums. The fire is coming! He is reminding us that that this earth is full of sin and unbelief. Life is not a stream of sunshine and rainbows and at the end, we'll join, one and all to sing a majestic

rendition of "the circle of life". Sin ruined this world and sin cannot remain in the presence of God. It must be done away with.

In the lesson from Jeremiah, the LORD declares **"his word is like a fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock to pieces."** It separates sin and unbelief and those who harbor it in their heart and it burns it up! So it is with the fire that Jesus brings. The fire of his word causes division not peace. How does it divide? It divides believers from unbelievers just like John the Baptist prophesied about Jesus. **"His winnowing fork is in his hand"** to separate the wheat from the chaff. I never really understood how this worked until I saw it in Israel. You take a wooden pitchfork and fling the grain up in the air on a breezy day. Then the wind blows the chaff into a separate pile, while the wheat falls down. When it's been separated, the wheat is gathered into the barn and the chaff is burned.

Jesus tells us this division takes place even inside the family, people who live in the same house. "There will be five who are divided against each other... father against son, mother against daughter, mother against her son's wife. This isn't just Jesus telling us that occasionally your parents or your in-laws might drive you a little crazy. He's saying the reality is this—even in your own home, sin may grab the hearts of the people you love most and divide you.

How difficult that is when family customs and pressure make it difficult to listen to what God's Word tells us. When all of a sudden, the priorities your loved ones once had are no longer the same. A late night out is more important than getting our spiritual nutrition for the week. "The weekends are the only time we get to spend together as a family, and family is the most important thing." No it's not, Jesus tells us. Listening to the Word is most important! But that kind of pressure is hard to deal with. Will the pressure get to you? Will it sap your enthusiasm? Will it cause you to back down, just go with the flow, and start sliding down that the same slippery slope?

Being labeled the "bad guy" by people of your own flesh and blood is definitely no fun. But are you willing to make that sacrifice because your conscience is captive to the word of God? This is no joke! It might be the hardest thing in the world to let the word shine in your heart, to let it burn away the sins that cannot be tolerated any longer, and to let it divide you from those who don't believe or hold to the words of Jesus. But we cannot ignore sin in our own hearts or in the hearts of our loved ones. So we lay our hearts bare before the Lord, confessing the sins in our own heart and crying out for mercy. So also true love for those we love calls us to warn and to call sin sin, because Jesus is coming with fire. That fire will one day burn up sin

once and for all as we stand on the last day before the judgement seat of Christ.

So were we wrong about Jesus after all? Was all that stuff about him being the Prince of Peace really just an attempt to make ourselves feel better? Jesus says himself, “You think I came to bring peace? No, but division!” Now hear me carefully. I am by no means wiping away the warning Jesus gives or softening it in the least, but we realize from the rest of Scripture that Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. He tells the disciples, “Peace I leave with you.” The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2, “**He, Jesus, is our peace!**” He’s the one “**who proclaimed peace to those far and near**”. So why does Jesus seem like he’s contradicting himself?

The statement Jesus is making is meant to be dramatic, exaggerated to catch the ear, just as sometimes we might say something like, “I didn’t come here to talk.” The statement isn’t meant to be universally true, it’s meant to make a strong point! In the context, Jesus is also not talking about whether his true mission is to bring peace between us and God. He’s saying his mission is not to bring peace between us and everyone in this world. He didn’t come to make peace between us and other people. In fact, he told us that “**all men will hate you because of me!**” (Luke 21:27) We know full well the truth of that statement as our beliefs our becoming the only thing in this world that can’t be tolerated.

So how can Jesus be the Prince of Peace and flamethrower, one who casts fire on the earth? How can he bring division as he says here and also bring the unity that we hear about so often elsewhere in Scripture? There’s one verse we’ve passed over so far and it’s the key verse. “**I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!**”

What baptism is this talking about? Jesus had already been baptized by John in the Jordan. Here Jesus uses the word “baptism” in this way to point ahead to what he knew was going to happen. As Jesus had already said earlier in Luke’s Gospel, “**The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.**” (Luke 9:22) Jesus knew that soon he must be immersed in death, baptized by fire, if you will. Soon he would be buried in the grave for the sins of the world, and how distressed he was to complete it, to **finish** it. Knowing everything to come, who of us wouldn’t have hit the high road and headed for the hills. Instead your friend and Savior “**resolutely set out for Jerusalem.**” (Luke 9:51)

With eyes wide open, he walked the journey that would end in his death. Do see you see now why we sang “Go to Dark Gethsemane”? There in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, Jesus experienced the full

distress of his impending baptism into death. “**Father if it is your will take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done.**” (Luke 22:44) So he prayed as drops of sweat that seemed like blood poured to the ground. The words of Jesus from today’s Gospel echo in Gethsemane, “**How distressed I am until it is finished.**”

Then on the day after that night of struggle in the garden, the sinless Lamb of God underwent the baptism he had been anxiously awaiting—death on a cross, cursed as a criminal by his own Father, bearing the sin of all, to take away sin for every last person, even for you. There on the cross as he was baptized with the ultimate suffering, he proclaimed “**It is finished**” (John 19:30) and he sunk away into death. How distressed he was until it was finished, there he finished it once and for all. So the writer to the Hebrews calls him “**the author and perfecter, (the finisher) of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of throne of God.**” Hebrews

The one who warns us that he comes to cast fire on the earth is also the one whose joy it was to bear God’s wrath in our place. He is our friend and Savior, the Prince of Peace, who has reconciled us to God with his own blood. Now he calls us to follow him, to hear his words and believe them, to put them into practice. So his word divides between those who believe it and those who scoff, between those who long for his coming again and those who long for the things of this earth.

There is no sugar coating this division. What is divided from God during this life will remain separated from him eternally in the life to come. That is a hard truth and sobering warning. But at the same time it gives comforting good news! God gathers you, his wheat, into his barn. Those who have been buried with Christ into death through baptism are those he gathers to himself. As he gathers them together in this life, waiting to be taken in, he unites his followers together into a family. That’s our motto here at Mount Olive—**a family growing in Christ**. You may lose family of your own blood, but you gain a family of believers.

Jesus’ words today equip us with many things: peace with God through Jesus’ fiery baptism, the comfort of a family of believers, and finally a powerful invite to come and see Jesus, the perfecter of our faith. Who in your family desperately needs to hear again Jesus’ words working on their heart.? Make a plan to do it, pray about it, and see it through. God’s powerful word will accomplish his purpose through you. Amen

**Jesus the Good Shepherd says to his flock, “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33**