

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” Note here that it’s Jesus who is speaking, and remember he doesn’t need any help from those who think they can hasten whatever they think he’s going to bring about. Jesus isn’t launching a crusade, lashing out in hate against anyone, instead he’s is talking about judgment, remember John the Baptizer saying about Jesus “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Some of that “fire” has to do with people having to decide whether to be for him or against him.

“I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Division that has to do with a baptism of his own blood as he undergoes suffering and death at the behest of the religious leaders and political authorities. Then Jesus tells us that he’s under much stress “until it is completed.” But he was sent for this outcome and as his words and actions in fulfilling the will of the Father, lead toward that outcome, folks need to make decisions about whether to follow him or to oppose him.

At his birth, the angels proclaimed “peace on earth”, but he does not come to bring peace on earth but division, including within families. Son of God, Son of Man, Messiah, great prophet, Teacher, Rabbi, all of these he was, and more, but he didn’t fit the image of any of these. Even John the Baptizer had sent disciples to ask if he was the one who was to come, or if another should be expected. Because even John the Baptizer, and everyone else tried to fit Jesus into their own preconceived notions as to what Messiah, Son of Man and the rest should be. And many, especially religious leaders had hardened hearts, akin to a well-trodden path on which seed might fall and immediately be snapped up by the birds of the air, heard Jesus but didn’t listen. And so division started, within families and more, including in the early church.

Now we here in this country don’t suffer persecution because of following Jesus. Yes there are those who say we do, but they don’t know what they are talking about. We don’t have doors kicked in, we’re not hauled away for torture or beheadings, we are not uprooted and forced to leave our homes where our families have lived for two thousand years. There is division though in what we might loosely call the Christian family. I wonder if that’s why the people who say they aren’t affiliated with a denomination are growing, while practically every denomination is shrinking. Too many churches are either affiliated with the status quo, or too loud and strident in their condemnations of others they don’t regard as fitting within their norms.

But if we are a people who live comfortably with the status quo values of our society, then we are a long way from the kind of Christianity envisaged in the readings today from Luke’s gospel and our second lesson from Hebrews. Jesus said he came to bring fire to the earth, that he would divide people as they found themselves on opposing sides responding to him.

Now in the letter to the Hebrews, living faith is depicted as people persecuted. Here it seems that at least in part, Christianity is safe and innocuous because of the way we think and talk about faith, as if it were something we have. For example, "She's got a lot of faith" or "You need stronger faith," even "Do I have enough faith?" Sounds like faith is quantitative, something we own. It's a commodity we draw upon, because it's really about us and our needs.

But faith is not a thing that can be possessed, it's something done, something acted upon. It's obedience. Jesus commands us to love one another, we obey, even loving the unloveable as we support and defend them. Jesus tells us to go and do like as the good Samaritan, we obey. It comes down to providing hospitality and assistance to those others in our society want to keep out. Acts of faith can cause disagreement within families and even get us in trouble with our neighbors.

Faith is obedience and trust. Trust that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of the world and you make a choice among what is presented and you back one side over the other. And once you do that, sparks fly and the fire breaks out, the fire Jesus brings to the earth. If we trust God more than the world's closed border policies, we allow more immigrants and refugees into our country, we risk the good will of our neighbors. Saying all people are entitled to equal rights and protection under the law, we risk the disapproval of the culture warriors.

But this is what faith is, it's taking sides and acting on those choices. So, where is the good news in this? Our readings point to the answer. Jesus speaks of a baptism of fire, and from our baptisms, we emerge with a new identity and a new life filled with God's Holy Spirit. The baptism of fire, like the baptism of water, is the birth place of new life. And where there is life there is hope. And in our reading from Hebrews we hear of God's people "by faith" passing "through the Red Sea as if it were dry ground," passing from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the promised land.

Our Hebrews reading recounts the sufferings of God's people due to faith, a list of mocking, flogging, chains and imprisonment, stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword, destitute, persecuted, tormented. But these people and countless others constitute that "great cloud of witnesses" who cheer us on as "we run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Surrounded by the witnesses before us, following Jesus, we too shall enter the promised land.

AMEN