

Disturbing the peace

Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56 (August 14, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

I guess you've read or seen in the news about some of the wildfires that are burning throughout the world right now. Like the ones in Newfoundland. There are two fires there that are burning out of control.



It's fire season in Canada. Summer heat, the lack of rain, lightning, wind, human carelessness, and a changing climate – all these have a role to play in how the season unfolds. Some parts of the arid BC interior have suffered greatly. Remember the fire last year that destroyed the town of Lytton? Even here in Saskatoon, we've had times when smoke has filled in the air. And soccer centres became places of refuge for evacuated northern communities.



In our Gospel reading, Jesus has some hard words for us to hear. Listen: "I came to bring *fire* to the earth," he says, "and how I wish it were already kindled." Jesus appears eager to call down fire from above. In fact, he, seems to equate it with the very mission of God.

As we read further, his words become even more disturbing. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather *division!*" What are good peace-loving Christians to do with these difficult sayings that seem to contradict so much of Jesus' life and ministry?

Remember what the angels proclaimed at Jesus birth? "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours." On many occasions, Jesus offered words such as these: "Your faith has saved you; go in *peace*." (Luke 7:50) Or these words to his disciples: "*Peace* I leave with you; my peace I give to you." (John 14:27) Wasn't peace a major part of Jesus' teaching? So why now this talk about fire coming to the earth?

And why this talk about division even to the most treasured of our relationships? "From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three." Fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. Jesus, what are you doing?



Angels Announcing the Birth of Christ to the Shepherds, by Govert Flinck, 1615-1660

In my years of ministry, I've never preached on this passage. I've avoided it. Can you blame me? Yet, here they are: these troubling, confusing, difficult words.



The Jesus revealed in scripture is not necessarily the Jesus we think we know. We are always learning more.



Christ Cleansing the Temple by Bernardino Mei (Italian, 1612 - 1676), Getty Museum.

I've come to see that Jesus was not always an easy fellow to be around. His life was marked by conflict. Conflict with Satan, first of all. Out in the wilderness, with no one else around, he rebuked the tempter.

Jesus also had run-ins with religious leaders. They were keen to hold onto power, and reluctant to accept his message. So much so that their opposition intensified, culminating in his crucifixion.

Even among friends, Jesus could be abrasive at times. Remember how he called Peter "Satan," and told him to get behind him? Ouch – that must have hurt!

Jesus' relationship with his own family was difficult. On one occasion his mother and brothers came calling for him. And Jesus replied by saying that *his* family are all those who do the will of God.

If Jesus were to show up at church here one Sunday, how would it go? Would it be sunshine and happiness? Or would Jesus challenge us? Maybe even offend us?

C.S. Lewis wrote in his Narnia Chronicles that Aslan the Lion (the fictional character representing Jesus) was good, but that he was *not* a tame lion. There's a freedom to Jesus that can be a little scary.



There was a time when conservation officers tried to *prevent* wildfires. But we now see things a little differently.

Fires, we believe, are a necessary part of nature's cycle, a naturally occurring phenomenon that leads to the *rejuvenation* of the forest. Without regular fire, forests become old, the canopy too shaded. To maintain the rich diversity of plant life, there have to be some periodic burns.

We think of fires as destructive. Yet after the devastation of a forest fire, new life miraculously emerges! I wonder ... could that be why Jesus talked about bringing fire to the earth? Did Jesus desire our *renewal*?



We sure do *need* that! It was Isaiah who said the people of Israel were like a vineyard, planted by God.

"My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill," Isaiah says. "He dug it, cleared it, planted it with choice vines. Did *everything* possible to enable their growth into beautiful, healthy plants producing lovely fruit, and even better red wine."

But this vineyard, planted by God, yielded only wild grapes, small and bitter. So much love, so lavishly spent: "He expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry."



We need the briars and thorns of our lives to be cleared away. We need our drought-stricken souls to be watered. We need the landscape to be renewed.



In the Bible, fire can symbolize many things: It can be the holy presence of God that appears unexpectedly in a burning bush. (Genesis 3:2) It can be the judgement of God that consumes whole cities accused of injustice. (Genesis 19:24) It can be fire that refines and purifies, transforming base metal into precious silver. (Malachi 3:2-3) It can be fire that comes in Pentecostal power, resting on believers, and stirring them to action, causing their hearts to burn with the Good News of Jesus. (Acts 2:3)



Fire is not always a destructive thing! Fire can bring *both* judgement *and* new life. In that way, it's like baptism. The apostle Paul says this:



“We have been buried with him [Christ] by baptism into *death*, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of *life*.” (Romans 6:4)

We *die* to the power of sin. We *live* under the lordship of Jesus Christ. And this is a daily dying and rising. A destruction and a resurrection. The fire of God puts to death, and the fire of God brings new life.



So, fire is not always destructive. And peace is not always a good thing either! Does that shock you? Let me explain.

There is such a thing as *false* peace. By that, I mean a kind of peace, where everything seems okay on the surface, but underneath, when you take off that layer of politeness, that façade of “everything’s fine,” you discover that things are *not* so fine.

You discover that a relationship is in trouble. That issues are unresolved. You discover the wounds of our First Nations people. You discover the lingering prejudice that folks of colour continue to experience. You hear the stories of disagreements in churches that were too quickly papered over. You see the cracks in a marriage that have been festering for years.



Scripture speaks of false prophets who smear whitewash on walls, and proclaim “Peace” where there is no peace! (Ezekiel 13:10, Jeremiah 8:11) We settle for the *appearance* of peace. But that is a poor second-best to the deep Shalom of God’s Kingdom!



There can be a kind of *placidness* among us, which we think of as peace – but it is not. We think it’s wonderful when there’s no friction in our lives. But there is a peacefulness that is not healthy.



I remember reading the classic story, *Moby Dick*, and coming across a vivid description of what it's like to be on a sailing ship at sea, and to go for days on end with no wind. Imagine.

At first, it's lovely. No storms. Just the vast flatness of the ocean, calmly stretching out in all directions. But soon the sun grows burning hot. And the air becomes stifling. The crew grows impatient. There's nothing to do. The ship is motionless, dead in the water. The journey cannot continue.

In the same way, our faith can be stuck, our spiritual lives dull and boring. There *is* a kind of peacefulness to that, but *not* the sort that Jesus desires.

"I came to bring *fire* to the earth," he says, "and how I wish it were already kindled." And we say, "Really Jesus, do you think that's a good idea?" "I've *not* come to bring peace," he says, "but rather *division*." And we respond, "There's already so much division in our time!"

What if ... the divisions we see – in our world, in our politics, in our churches, in our families – what if some of them are *opportunities*?

Could the divisions we experience be a kind of revelation, a laying bare of things we had not realized, leading to the possibility of growth, new learning, new practising of what it means to be the body of Christ? An opportunity to allow the wind of God to fill our sails and move us forward on our journey? Could Jesus, sometimes, intentionally be a *disturber* of our peace?

Don't get me wrong. There is a peace I'm sure he *wants* us all to experience: Peace that is not of this world. Peace that passes all understanding. *Christ's* peace that he gives to his disciples.

But sometimes *our* peace is cheap and flimsy. It is self-serving. It ignores injustice, and preserves the status quo. And that is *not* the kind of peace that Jesus brings. Such peace is merely the peace of convenience, and it never lasts for very long.



I'm wondering this morning if there are things in your life that may be troubling you. What could they be? And if there are, where is Jesus in the midst of them? Could he be present, *in* those very things? Could he be calling for your attention? Could he be offering a new way for you to follow? Could he be leading you from death to life?

Maybe you've been trying to move on to other things when, really, it's *this* thing that you need to address. It makes you uncomfortable. But it keeps bubbling to the surface, and it won't go away. Neither will Jesus go away. He is always leading us to life in all its fullness.



On the front of your bulletin today is a picture of fireweed. Do you know what that is? Have you seen it before? After a forest fire, it's often the first plant to appear. It's beautiful, isn't it? Such a brilliant colour!

To me, it's a symbol of life, a symbol of resurrection. After the fire has wreaked its havoc, this plant emerges from the ashes, springing up among the charred



and blackened trunks. It is a harbinger of *more* to come. It is a plant that brings us promise: From the darkness of death comes the hope of new life.

If Jesus brings fire to the earth, it is so the earth will come to experience the *life* of God's Kingdom. If Jesus dismantles our ways of being, it is to gift us with *new* ways of being. If he sets fire to our lives, it is so that we may be filled with the Holy Spirit. If he disturbs *our* peace, it is to bring us *his* peace: the genuine, healing, everlasting peace of the reign of God. May it be so! Amen.