



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. ADAM CONLEY, CURATE
THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 17, 2025
JEREMIAH 23:23-29; PSALM 82; HEBREWS 11:29-12:2; LUKE 12:49-56

THY GOLD TO REFINE

Luke 12:49-56 [*Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 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! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"*]

"Judge eternal, throned in splendor, Lord of lords and King of kings, with thy living fire of judgment purge this land of bitter things."

Yikes. Despite the jaunty tune to which we sang those words from the opening hymn, we're not keeping things too overly light and friendly this morning, are we?

Even so, I think some of our hymn texts today can help us make sense of what Jesus is saying in the gospel we just heard proclaimed from Luke.

Jesus is direct. We're drawn into his uncompromising ire right out of the gate.

"Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth?" he asks. "No, I tell you, but rather division!"

Jesus makes no bones about coming to cast fire upon the earth. He even sounds incredulous that his listeners don't already understand what this means.

Ok, time out. Before we go deeper with this, let's make something clear. There's a caveat, burning brightly as it were, at the heart of the fiery imagery in this morning's Liturgy of the Word.

Many of us come from Christian or other religious traditions that have misused fire and brimstone rhetoric to diminish and demean entire populations of the human family.

Jesus is not doing that here.

If some of the language you hear this morning elicits a painful response, I want to make space for that, and I invite you to allow us to hold that space with you.

My fellow Christians and all who seek after truth: if our primary ethical concern is an obsession with heteronormative family values or patriarchal gender conformity, we are caught up in a serious distortion of the gospel.

Jesus is not wagging a finger of condemnation at you or me because he believes any cultural code or religious dogma can diminish your worthiness as a loving and beloved child of God.

Narrow tolerance for how we express our gender and sexual identities or build our families – or don't – let alone the toxic dividing lines of racism and class, – none of these "othering" boundaries play any role in how human relationships are ordered in the household or neighborhood of God.

Jesus draws us into this expansive Kingdom reality with decisive language. To make

Christ our highest allegiance will inevitably challenge the primacy of traditional familial arrangements: "Mother against daughter, son against Father, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law..."

Some scholars think Luke left out the obvious example of "Wife against Husband," only so that enough cultural coherence would remain for the early church not to dismiss Jesus' socially disruptive message out of hand.

Much of what certain Christian quarters – especially in this country – consider the New Testament model for family values is based on Roman household codes. What was called the "Pater Familias," the patriarchal family unit with the father as the unassailable head and the mother confined to a homebound child-rearing role, was seen as a mini-fiefdom – the basic social building block for the Empire writ large. Does this sound at all familiar?

God planted a spark of the divine in each of us, and that spark shines through no matter how we relate to each other in our family systems. One of the gifts of church is that it affords us a weekly communal setting for reminding each other that, as the Psalmist puts it, we are all "fearfully and wonderfully made," and as Christians, we belong first and foremost to Christ's Body.

We also gather to encounter the divine spark in each other, in the Word, and the sacrament of this altar. This, my friends, is what equips us to seek and find the sacred in *every* human neighbor, no matter their creed.

You see, Jesus came to free the world of every threat to human dignity, not to attack it based on human cultural norms and taboos. He brings a fire of life, not death.

Listen to this line again from our opening hymn: “With thy living fire of judgment, purge this land of bitter things.”

Luke paints a vivid picture of Jesus’ grief over humanity’s failure to live with love, justice, and mercy. He is wholly committed to his calling, but he carries the burden of his responsibility in every raw nerve and fiber of his being. Jesus is having a viscerally human experience that reflects a searing recognition of his Messiahship.

With that divine spark that burns and refines within us all, Jesus is beseeching us to join him in setting the world alight! One gift of an arresting gospel text like this is that it compels us to participate in the deeply felt urgency of Jesus’ mission.

“How I wish it were already kindled!” he says. There’s that opening hymn again:

“With thy living fire of judgment purge this land of bitter things.”

The hymnist has captured our own, honest yearning for the justice of God’s judgment here. And that judgment must burn through us, too, lest we think we bear no responsibility for the “bitter things” wreaking havoc in this land – and world.

You see, “Jesus is preaching himself as the transformative and purifying fire, and his baptism as the gate into the kingdom of God.”¹

Jesus is the source of our total purification for life. As Christians, we believe that when we are united with Christ into a death like his, we will certainly be united with Christ into a resurrection like his.”² That is to say, we live ever more fully into the inbreaking Kingdom.

This means we cannot simply blame the most obvious culprits for starving children in Gaza, or the terrorizing and violent separation of Migrant families in this country, or the complete lack of dignity and security being denied our trans and gender non-conforming siblings.

We must look to our complicity in these evils – known and unknown, things done and left undone, and we must pray to recall and act upon the spark of Christ’s likeness in each of

¹ The Rev. Kelly Moody, Sermon, August 17, 2025

² Rom 6:5 (NRSVUE)

us that equips and strengthens us, to do something about it.

There's another hymn chosen to help us reflect on God's Word for us this morning. The fourth verse of our final hymn – words we will shortly sing as we go back out into the world renewed by this table and each other in the power of the Spirit – tells us that God's grace is “our sufficient supply” to act and live for change.

Imagining Christ speaking words of reassurance, this hymnist reminds us of Jesus' eternal promise to us:

“The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design,
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”

My friends, we have much work to do. Let's light a fire under it!



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!