

Luke 12:49-56**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C****August 17, 2025****The Rev. Katherine Bush**

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" My guess is that when you heard that, you didn't think about sweet birthday candles or a cozy campfire. With some good work from other branches of the Christian community, I'd suppose that this statement lands harshly in our ears and in our hearts and in our imaginations: scorched earth and unquenchable fire and all that. And when you add what follows, division in our households, accusations of hypocrisy, this language certainly registers as hard and possibly punitive. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" I'm not going to stand up here and soft-pedal this today; that would be disingenuous. I do want us to take a moment and consider what sort of announcement this is.

Fire, of course, is one of the core elements, understood since classical antiquity as a building block of the universe. There are myths in every culture about its arrival and its role. Fire is a necessary tool, and the harnessing of fire is a major moment in human development. It's as crucial for creating as it is for destroying. For those who have survived house fires or bodily burns, there's nothing to compare to the loss and the pain. And fire channeled in a lighthouse or a lantern is one of the most gracious gifts we can stumble toward in the dark. In scripture, fire is just as complex. It consumes, and it purifies. And fire is often a signifier of the presence of God: the burning bush calling to Moses, the pillar of fire guiding the Israelites, the tongues of flame alighting on the disciples at Pentecost. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" There's a line earlier in Luke when Gabriel greets Mary, and Mary "wonders what sort of greeting this might be." So, I think it's fair to wonder what sort of proclamation this might be today.

As beauty is in the eye of the beholder, any answer to the question of what this fire means ultimately lies in the heart of the listener. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" When I'm convinced of my righteousness and full up on righteous anger, I can welcome and even cheer the arrival of a Jesus who is going to burn it all down. I'm quick to point out all the little fires that I'd like Jesus to start, and even glad to hand him some matches. But, of course, my more honest self knows that there is plenty of chaff and straw to burn away in my own life, and that version of me hears this line from Jesus and cowers a little - or a lot, and then tries to do the interpretive dance of making him mean something else. Surely, fire is a metaphor, right?

And it is. It is a metaphor for the blazing presence of God that lights up every corner of every room and of every heart, and that's good news as much as it's potentially bad news - or at least difficult news. This light, Jesus promises, will bring division. Pause with me, though, and consider that Jesus is not bringing conflict, or at least not conflict for conflict's sake, but rather, Jesus brings change. The presence of God lighting up our lives changes us, and what must follow change is movement in new directions. The impact of God fully arriving into our lives will mean the rearranging of our priorities and the rethinking of our choices and our relationships. And that is enough to turn a household upside down. We will be divided the moment we take a step in a new direction.

And here's the other thing: however and whenever fire arrives in our lives, as a tool, as warmth in the cold, as destructive, as a purifying and revealing agent of change, it's still fire. And we still must feel it. There's a moment in the novel The Fault in Our Stars when the boy, Augustus, says, "That's the thing about pain. It demands to be felt." Fire demands to be felt. Jesus wants to kindle a fire in the world that will be frightening and beautiful. He demands that we feel the presence of God in our lives, in our homes, on the earth. And in some ways, this will necessarily hurt because change is so very hard and, by definition, disruptive to our comfortable, secure little lives. It doesn't hurt because God comes to bring pain for pain's sake, but because every choice we make in the light of God's presence - choices to follow Christ, choices to light up our lives, choices to burn things down - will mean turning toward one thing and turning away from another. This turning will be difficult and often painful.

In a collection of stories from the so-named "Desert Fathers and Mothers," an ancient repository of sayings and tales, we hear a story about a conversation between a novice and an elder. Abba Lot, the novice, went to Abba Joseph, the elder, and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame." In another translation, he says, "Why not become fire?"

Why not, indeed. Perhaps you've heard the idea that we all contain the spark of the divine within us, that we hold a bit of flame within us, kindled by God and tended by us as we move through our journeys. If this is true, then part of our work is carrying that flame, knowing it can be dangerous and also creative. What might it look like to become all flame, to become fire? That, to me, is the most difficult and uncomfortable question. I'm not a firebrand. I can talk grandly, but like the novice, I enjoy my little practices and patterns and my creature comforts. I like a Jesus who comes to bring stories that are heart-warming, not incendiary. And if he's bringing purifying light, could he please direct that elsewhere? (And as I mentioned, I do have some notes about where that might be.) But the wisest elders I know suggest both in their words and in their actions that more is possible. What would it be like if your life were lit up from within? The people I admire and adore are people whose lives burn brightly, all flame. Jesus didn't say, *here's a little candle*, he said, "I come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" "If you will, you can become all flame."

It almost doesn't matter if that fire is going to judge and destroy or illuminate and reveal; it's going to be hard either way. Being in the presence of God overwhelms because the presence of God is overwhelming. Because this fire demands to be felt. This Jesus demands that we make choices and change our lives. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" And standing in that blazing light will change us. Even more when we see that we could also become all flame, that we could burn with love and courage, that Jesus could shine in our hearts, that he wants nothing more and nothing less than to kindle a fire and set our lives ablaze.