

We are the sign of the times.

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Wow. On first hearing, the Gospel today has the ring of the end times to it, doesn't it? -- like something from a "Left Behind" novel? And it hardly matters what reading we focus on today; all of them send us right back into the fire. So we may as well circle back to the Gospel of Luke.

But in doing that, I think we need to set our first impressions aside and listen to this again.

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Jesus tells this crowd that has been following him for 49 verses. "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

Now this image of fire, could be referring to God's impending judgment. Jesus has been telling his followers to be ready for the master to return like a thief in the night. But I think at this point in the chapter Jesus is leaving analogies behind and giving us a glimpse right into his own heart. What we see is his longing for what is on the other side of this trek to Jerusalem, the other side of his death and resurrection and ascension. He's talking about what those events will release into the world: God's Holy Spirit. And he is acknowledging the disruption of power that will ensue.

Jesus is longing for the Kingdom of God to come. This is what Jeremiah longs for, what Luke and his audience long for and what the author of Hebrews longs for. Is it what we long for?

Well not if it means all this divisiveness, right?

"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" Jesus says to the crowd. "No, I tell you, but rather division! ... 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."

Does this kind of talk make anyone here nervous? Haven't we had far too many holy wars and too much violence in Jesus' name already? Yes. We have. So I don't think that is what Jesus is longing for. I think that for Jesus the violence that many Christians are doing in his name feels more like his cross than his kingdom.

So what exactly does Jesus want to divide? It sounds like he has got something against the institution of the family. And he does in a way. Because he's describing the household of Caesar -- a system very familiar to Luke's audience. The empire featured a vast household structure not based on love but on patronage and oppressive power all the way from Augustus, the father of Rome, down to the lowliest slave. That Roman extended family included natural children, adopted people, dependent clients and slaves, with power concentrated in the paternal figures at the top -- first fathers then sons, then mothers then daughters, or mothers-in-law then daughters in law, as the case may be.

Most everyone else had little to no agency in that system. That's what predominated in those first century times in Palestine.

And Jesus had come to change those times -- and all times. In fact there were already signs that God was doing something new in that disruptive age. Can his followers see them, Jesus wonders? Can Luke's audience pinpoint them? Can we?

"You hypocrites!" Jesus chastises the crowds. "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Jesus isn't talking about reading the weather, or the newspaper, to figure out what is happening. He is talking about reading the world for signs of the power and the transformative action of God.

Jesus saw his very life as such a sign, one that would turn the established order upside down with its healing, and authoritative preaching and insistence that God, not Caesar, was his father.

Jesus saw his impending death on the cross as such a sign, because it would rob death of its power altogether.

He anticipated his resurrection and ascension to be such a sign because they would open up the way for the Spirit of God to enter the world the way fire does -- in a sweeping path that changes everything it touches, a blaze of love.

The author of Luke understood his faith community to be such a sign, as well, in the way it worshiped God, and proclaimed Jesus and loved one another. And it understood itself to be a divisive and disturbing sign in Roman culture, where

there was no such thing as egalitarianism, where people didn't serve one another, where personal honor was everything.

IF Luke's community was a sign of the times then, we are a sign of the times now. One of the things that Jesus is longing for in this 12th Chapter of Luke is us. He is longing for our relationship with him, for our faith in a saving God, for our lives lived in ways that disrupt the old empire and signal the presence of something new.

If this is true, then what are we a sign of in our problematic times? Are we a sign of the good news of a loving God? Of healing, transformative Word? Nonviolent resistance to evil structures? Are we a sign of the power of dying daily to the things that kill the soul and subvert love? Are we a sign of inclusion, courageous conversation, compassionate listening?

Because those are signs of the Divine will at play. They are signs of the presence of Christ. And they are the practice of those things as well.

What is St. Peter's a sign of in Glenside, in the diocese of Pennsylvania, in greater Philadelphia? As our Parish Profile Committee helps us explore who we are at this time, this is a key underline question. I encourage you to ask this of yourselves individually and collectively as you discern how St. Peter's Parish family is a sign of the presence of God.

To be a sign of the presence of God in these times means that our faith will be showing. And that kind of faith does not always keep the peace. Not when the sharp edge of that faith slices through the bonds that oppress, that humiliate, that exclude, that privilege. Not when it offers reconnections based on love, and mutuality, repentance, and repair. Love and acceptance are not the signs getting the most media exposure right now. But they are essential signs that the Kingdom is very, very close.

As the author of Hebrews describes it, the person of faith is already well into the race to the Kingdom. And friends, that race is taking us right into the fire.

To fight the fire that is out there, you gotta fan the fire that is in here.

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Jesus declares. So, I gotta ask, what is that divine fire kindling in this community of St.

Peter's, in these times? What prayer is burning in this community? These are the kinds of questions that we are asking of ourselves this year, so if you don't have an answer to them right now, let them smolder awhile.

"I have a baptism with which to be baptized" Jesus says, "and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

So I gotta ask, what old ways are dying in this faith community, as Christ invites you to into the baptismal waters of something wildly new? What old stories no longer hold, given the reality of these times? What are the eyes of this faith community opening to for the first time? If it's not immediately clear to you, give it a long, hard look over these upcoming months.

Because this is what Christian hope feels like in troubling and vicious times: Like a fire. Like a baptism. Like God is doing something new. Like an old, old longing, whose time has come.

Amen.