
Strange Fire

Luke 12:49-56

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 18, 2013 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer

Jesus has been hanging out in Galilee and by today's passage he is traveling toward Jerusalem. Crowds continue to gather and grow wherever he goes...because, well, he's a pretty cool guy. He's been healing folks along the way. Demons are cast out. He's even trending on Twitter. Hash-tag #JesusIsAwesome. You can almost imagine him with Tom's shoes, and a cup of locally roasted coffee in hand. And not surprisingly, Jesus has been teaching as he goes. A parable here, an exhortation there. In fact, earlier in chapter 12 of Luke, Jesus' teachings feel rather reassuring and cozy...he tells his followers not to worry, to consider the birds of the air and lilies of the field, reminding them that they are precious in God's sight. And hear these words of comfort, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) *This* is my kind of Jesus...with his gentle hipster ways and kindly prose.

But then, fast forward just a few verses to today's passage...it feels like Jesus has had a terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day. "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and oh how I wish it were blazing already! Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No! I've come for division!" Jesus is confronting and disrupting and turning things upside down.

Well then. What happened to considering the lilies? And our preciousness in God's sight? I mean, Jesus! Where did this angry guy come from? Perhaps he needs to sit-down with Dr. Phil. Or at least have more coffee.

We don't really like talking about *this* Jesus, do we? This Jesus feels wrathful and angry and intimidating. This Jesus somehow seems at home with people who picket funerals...and televangelists...and let's be honest, Christians don't need any more of that kind of PR! The wrath of God is a hard sell. Not many kids are memorizing this verse about fire and division at church camp, nor do people embroider it on pillows or hang it in the entryways of their homes. But it is a mistake to skip over this passage or to assume that Jesus' anger has no place in our modern, and so-called "sophisticated" grown-up theologies. So let's turn to something a little less grown-up.

In the children's novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, four British siblings enter a coat closet and discover a whole other world called Narnia. This magical world is filled with talking animals and the *original* Lion King, a lion named Aslan, who rules over all of Narnia. The youngest child Lucy strikes up a conversation with Mr. Beaver, asking about Aslan, "is he quite safe?" to which Mr. Beaver replies, "'Safe?...Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good.'"

Of course God isn't safe, but God is *good*. There are those in the kingdom of God who like to dwell on the fiery rage of God...the seemingly "unsafe" parts that scare us and seem to be trying to coerce us into obedience...but that kind of thinking leaves little room for the goodness of God. Many parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles understand the anger that can come in the midst of real love. One of my friends said to me, "Before I had kids, I never knew I could love so much, or that any one person could make me *so angry*." Loving parents know the unique heartache and rage that bubbles up when a beloved child becomes enchanted by or entangled in things that lead to their child's grief or harm. Similar to a parents' love, God's anger, holy anger must always be viewed through a lens of God's love, which may feel fierce and overwhelming, but which we know to be fundamentally good. There is a difference between wrath that is rooted in hatred and wrath that is grounded in profound love. Anger that draws its energy from hatred is dedicated to destruction and death, but anger that is motivated by love is dedicated to growth and edification.

Edification is intellectual, moral, or spiritual instruction in order to be enlightened and uplifted. It is the process of fully becoming the person or community that God intends. If someone says something that edifies you, you may find it helpful and instructive and enlivening. However, sometimes an edifying truth has a bit of sting to it...like hydrogen peroxide in a wound. Cleaning agents may sting and burn, but ultimately, the

peroxide is there to do good work. It purifies the wound, removes all the dirt and debris that can poison it, and readies it for healing. The edifying anger of a good God may not *feel* easy or loving, but because it is grounded in love, it is offered with hope for your building up and your flourishing, not your destruction. Edifying anger seeks only to destroy the things that could ultimately destroy and harm you.

Anger and fire are metaphorically linked in this passage, as they are in much of scripture. But fire is not just a sign of anger, it is a sign of transformation. Think back to Moses' encounter with the burning bush at the foot of Mt. Sinai. When he encounters the great "I am" in the burning bush, this experience leads Moses to a place of conflict with Pharaoh and the overthrow of Egypt, but also the liberation and freedom for God's chosen people. This was a fire that burned, but didn't destroy.

In the book of Daniel, the young Jewish boys, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego find themselves facing execution by an angry King Nebuchadnezzar because they would not worship the King's idol. They are thrown into a fiery furnace of blazing fire and yet are left unharmed. When the king looks into the blazing furnace, he doesn't see the destruction of the three boys, but his eyes are transformed as his eyes are opened to the presence of God. This was a fire that burned, but didn't destroy.

The prophet Malachi refers to God the refiner who sits by the fire. (Malachi 3:2-3) We don't have a whole lot of professional refiners around the market these days. But in ancient times, a refiner, otherwise known as a silversmith or goldsmith, did show up on a lot of street corners. The process of refining a precious metal removes all the impurities from the precious metal...to enable it to be molded and shaped free from things that mar and deform the metal and lessen its value. It is a fine art, which requires careful attention. The refiner is attentive and deliberate, carefully watching the silver as he holds it in the fire until the silver is purified. This is a fire that burns, but doesn't destroy.

There is a story of a woman who visits a silversmith. She asks him how he knows when the silver is refined. The silversmith responds, "when I can see my face in the silver."

God is the refiner, carefully holding his gaze on each of us as he refines precious metal until it reflects his own image back at him.

The fire of God's anger is directed at injustice, at oppression, at the sin of the world and of our lives...at a systemic level and at an individual level...and it burns away until what is precious and beautiful is revealed. This fire edifies us so that we are transformed into the likeness of Christ. It is no wonder that fire has also come to signify the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a fire that burns, but doesn't destroy.

But let's be honest, we're talking about fire. And we all know that fire does burn. And burns hurt. The process of transformation is not always one without pain. Anyone who has been through significant personal transformation knows this pain first hand.

In January, the New York Times published an article titled "Can Forgiveness Play a Role in Criminal Justice?"¹ It tells the story of Conor and Ann, a young couple barely out of high school. They were close. Their families were close. With no history of violence, the news that Conor had shot Ann was a shock to everyone.

Ann's dad recalls praying by his daughter's bedside in the intensive care unit. She was intubated and dying, unable to speak. Yet somehow, he felt his unconscious daughter speak to him over and over: "forgive him."

His response was immediate and audible, "No, it's impossible. Ann, you're asking too much."

Ann remained on life support for a few days before she died. During that time, her dad realized that it wasn't just Ann asking him over and over to forgive Conor, but that it was also the voice of Jesus.

So instead of focusing solely on the crime and punishment of Conor, Ann's parents decided to embark on a journey of reconciliation through restorative justice. This meant 3-days of sitting in a room with Conor, his parents, and a facilitator, telling difficult truths, exposing deep rage and anguish, not protecting each other

¹ "Can Forgiveness Play a Role in Criminal Justice," by Paul Tullis, January 4, 2013.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/magazine/can-forgiveness-play-a-role-in-criminal-justice.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

from the horrors of the crime, or from everyone's unimaginable loss. The criminal lawyer who was there said, "It was excruciating to listen to them talk...It was as traumatic as anything I've ever listened to in my life."

By the end of the three days, a transformation had taken place in each person, but perhaps most notably in Ann's father whose "No – forgiveness is impossible" turned into a "Yes, forgiveness is possible." But that "Yes" came a price. This was not cheap forgiveness. Ann's father let himself go through the flames of anguish to have his anger and pride, his shame and helplessness at the tragic death of his daughter slowly begin to burn away, to fall and turn to ash, until what was left was real forgiveness, tried by fire. These two families did not ask to be in this fiery crucible, or to encounter the pain of the flames. But in finding themselves there, they sat in the refining fire. And this process didn't end in destruction, but in reconciliation, a measure of peace, and a glimmer of hope.

The good news for us is that God is not just the refiner *by the fire*—the one who places us into the fire—but God *is the fire*. God is right there with us in the searing heat of the flames, burning with us until all is made pure. There is a scripture from 2 Timothy (1:6) that says "fan into flame the gift of God that is in you." Our God who is fire, yearns for his story to come blazing to life in us, and for our lives to reveal the beautiful, precious, and loving vision of God.

There are prophets in our midst who capture God's beautiful vision for the world, and they become enraged by the injustices they see, and the ways the precious lives are too often compromised. There is a reason the terms "angry" and "prophet" so often go together. Lisa Fithian has been a prominent social advocate and voice for justice since the 1970s. In an interview a few years ago said, "When people ask me, 'What do you do?' I say I create crisis, because crisis is that edge where change is possible."²

Crisis is that edge where change is possible. There are not many gifts to be found in the fires of a crisis, especially when that crisis feels like it could destroy and devour you. But one gift that crisis can offer, at both an individual and social level, is the opportunity for self-examination or communal-examination as well as prodding us to a possible change of course. Individual crisis or social crises allows us to delve into the depths of our heart, and God's heart and to seek God's edifying transformation of our lives. What would it be like to see each crisis as an opportunity for change? For transformation? For God to do a new thing?

The last two summers my hometown of Colorado Springs has seen terrible wildfires. This year during the Black Forest fire, I was doing an internet search on wildfires and was reminded of something provocative. A forest that is affected by fire experiences something called plant adaptation. In this, plants and trees often adapt to be more resistant to fire...they become stronger and more resistant in the face of future danger. Also, there is increased growth in the forest after a fire...the heat from the fire triggers the dormant pinecone seeds to pop open and land in the charred and ashy soil, which is a mysteriously rich soil for new life to burst forth. Environmental experts are now realizing the importance of fire for the pruning and regeneration of forests. Fire is important to enable new life and new creation to burst from the earth.

When Jesus says "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" we are given the opportunity trust in God's goodness, even in the midst of the blaze. We are given the opportunity to be edified...to stand in the fire that burns, but doesn't destroy. The next time you feel the heat of life burning around you, and the smoke is so thick you can't see even your next steps...the next time you find yourself standing in the midst of the flames of crisis...remember the strange fire of God. Remember that God is with you in the fire, and that you are being molded into something precious. Like the ashes left after the forest fire produce rich soil, the ashes left behind after the strange fire of God's refining are the starting point for new life. This has been true from the beginning. God has used dust and ash to create since the Garden of Eden, kneeling in the soil breathing new life. And God can and does do this with us today. God kneels in the dirt and ash, gently whispering and tending, patiently cherishing and coaxing new life out of places that appear charred and ruined. Where we see only worthless destruction, God sees promise and hope. In this burned and ashy ground, new life is gonna come.

² Thanks to Teresa Berger and her reflection "Disturbing the Peace" which appeared in *The Christian Century* on August 10, 2004, which references the interview with Lisa Fithian.