

Words We Forget Jesus Spoke  
Luke 12:49-56

"I came to bring fire upon the earth."

Not peace, but Division. " Mother-in-law against daughter-in-law... father against son?

What in the world is going on here? These words sound so different from what Jesus usually says, sometimes we forget he even spoke them. Not peace, but Division? " Mother-in-law against daughter-in-law... mother against daughter?

Doesn't sound much like the comforting and comfortable savior we are used to. The gentle shepherd, gentle savior. As I chose the hymns for this morning, I realized many would not resonate so well with the tenor of the Scripture. "Pass me not o gentle savior?" He's not so gentle today. "What a friend we have in Jesus?" "I come to bring division, not peace" aren't such friendly words. "There's within a heart a melody," with the refrain, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, sweetest name I know". . . today he doesn't sound so sweet.

Now to be sure, Luke does often present a view of a gentle, caring, approachable savior. Shepherds and angel chorus, peace on earth, good will towards men. Parables of lost sons and compassionate Samaritans.

But today we have these words, these other words, which have a bite to them. They are different

in tone from most of what Jesus preaches, but they are Jesus' words, and we need to listen to them, need to understand them.

As Jesus says, we need to interpret, properly the present time.

But what does that mean? Let's think about this. When Jesus says, interpret the present time, he's not talking about just our present time, our time filled with the frustrations and dangers of terror and hurricane and Al Qaida and war and global warming.

He's not talking about our present time with the connotation that the End of all things might be at hand. No, instead he is talking about his present time; the time he is on earth, walking, eating, sleeping, teaching, preaching, and heading to Jerusalem to cross and death and Easter.

And let's face it. Jesus is frustrated. Frustrated because the people do not see. Will not understand. Who he is. Frustrated that they refuse to make a decision to follow him. In the latter part of our lesson, he says, you know the weather so well. You see a cloud in the west, over the Mediterranean Sea, and you say, it's going to rain, and so it does. And when the wind shifts to the south, from Africa, you say, it's going to be a scorcher, and it is.

You interpret so well the signs of the weather. Yet so willfully ignore the sign that God is acting in a new and decisive way in the life of ministry of Jesus.

And folks, here's where you and I enter into the Gospel story. Because now through the abiding power and presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ is among us today. And now in our present age, we must decide, we must choose. We must interpret to our present age that Christ is alive and his kingdom near.

Speaking of weather, we are the generation that knows how to read those signs so very well. Hurricane Dean is making his destructive path through our hemisphere and we can't stop him, but at least we know where he is going. Our computer models are incredibly accurate. Beaufort will not be evacuated because we know how to read the signs. Dean will come nowhere near to us.

And so Jesus asks us: you know the signs of the weather so well. But what of me? Are you responding to the signs of my presence within you and among you. Are you bearing witness to my presence within the world today?

What to do about Jesus. That was the issue then and that is the issue each and every day of our journey.

I wonder if you might be a little like me in that sometimes I like to domesticate Jesus. Make him just be one of us. He is my gentle shepherd, he is the one who offers marvelous grace from this loving heart. The difficulty is that we begin to think that Jesus is some kind of benign favorite uncle who overlooks our faults, doesn't rock our boat. And meanwhile we live just as WE want

to live, leaving him out of the equation until we really need him.

If we're not careful, we find ourselves turning Jesus into a kind of spiritual fire extinguisher, keeping him behind glass until we suddenly really need him. As the song goes, He was there all the time, waiting patiently in line. . . And yes, this is true about Jesus. He is patient and kind and inviting and forgiving of us...

But he came for a deeper purpose as well. Not simply to forgive sinners one by one, but rather to bring about a radical reorientation of humanity itself.

Which leads us to again to our Scripture.

Why has Jesus come? Not simply to preach lovely words to a few folks here and there, not simply to heal a few and encourage some others.

Rather. . ."I have come to bring fire on earth and I wish it were completely kindled." In our Scripture today, Jesus says this is his reason for being: I came to bring fire on earth.

But whatever does he mean?

Our first impulse is to think fire means destruction, but not so in this case. Fire can also mean the compelling presence of God. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. A pillar of fire

led the children of Israel at night. It was through the cleansing fire of a coal that Isaiah received his power, and on the day of Pentecost it will be God's spirit like tongues of fire that will engulf the community.

So Jesus comes to proclaim that God is now present, in him, in a new and mighty way. Jesus begins the ultimate reign of God.

The stakes are high and the stakes are serious: Jesus has a special calling, a special baptism to fulfill, one which we now know is his death upon a cross.

The Jesus of our Scripture this morning is no sweet sentimental savior, is he?

And if Jesus is among us, what do we do about him? This was the ultimate question then and it is the ultimate question today for you, for me, for our church.

Do you think I have come to bring peace? No... not if it is anything less than the peace Jesus himself offers.

Jesus ministered during a time called the Pax Romana... the Roman Peace. As long as you behaved, and went along with everything, then you had peace. But Jesus does not want us to settle for a peace that is merely an anaesthetic against what is wrong. "Don't make waves" is not a Christian commandment neither is it a Christian virtue.

Slavery persisted in the United States because good Christian folk said, well let's not upset our slave holding church members. In Germany before World War II, there were plenty of churches everywhere, yet by and large the churches were silent. Because Hitler promised prosperity, and restoration of national pride. And peace like that, who could ignore?

Jesus reminds us how high the stakes are: I come to bring division, father against son, mother against daughter, mother in law against daughter in law, and so .

Now, we're aware of family squabbles, aren't we?

Reminds me of the days when telephones were new-fangled contraptions. One man did not believe that he could actually talk to another real person, until his mother in law called him, and while they were speaking lightning hit the line, he was jolted and tossed to the other side of the room. "Yup, that was my mother-in-law all right."

But Jesus has something more serious at stake. Are you willing to risk family division in order to remain faithful to Christ? What are you willing to risk to do the will of God? This is the question.

And it's more difficult than it may seem.

At my previous church, you might know that an African-American happened to follow me as pastor. One person who had often promised to begin attending the church told em he had

decided not to, once he heard about the new pastor?

“Why not?” I asked him. His reply: “Because my mother would spin in her grave if I did.”

Aside from the fact that his mother was presumably worshiping and singing in heaven with all sorts of folk of every color, this man had failed Christ at a decisive moment for his church. For the sake of peace within his family, and to honor his late mother’s bigotry, he turned his back on the church and the Christ who is head of the church.

Jesus said: even if you have to choose between me and your sister or your mother in law, choose me.

Don’t deny Christ just to get along, just for the sake of a meager peace. That’s what Jesus is saying. We can expand this thought. If it’s a choice between friends and Christ, choose Christ. If it’s a choice between nation and Christ, choose Christ. If it’s a choice between popularity and Christ, choose Christ. If it’s a choice between tradition and what God is calling us to do, choose Christ.

Christ comes to divide us from all that is less than him, so that we can be united in Him. And he calls us never to settle for any peace except the peace and wholeness and reconciliation that he offers.

And Christ tells us today his ministry is not just to the chosen, but to bring the fire of God's spirit upon all the earth.

May we be the ones who bear true witness to the signs of the times: that Jesus Christ is alive and He is Lord.

Come to think of it, these words sound exactly like Christ. May we never forget them. Amen.