**Luke 12:49-56 (ESV)**

“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! 50  I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! 51  Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. 52 For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. 53 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.” 54 He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. 56 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?”

**“The Refiner’s Fire”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. When we see fire there is always concern over getting burned. Parents show their fear over a stove by turning handles of pots inward to avoid an accident. Losing a home to fire uncovers deep loss with some things you cannot replace by just going to the store. Worst of all, fire can easily take life as seen tragically this summer with those elite firefighters in Arizona and the sudden windshift blamed on their deaths. Fire is dangerous. God even used it at times in the Old Testament as a sign of His judgment. Angels held a flaming sword guarding the entrance to the Garden of Eden against Adam and Eve. Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron the priest, burned unauthorized fire at worship and the Lord’s fire consumed them.

Yet, as much as fire is dangerous, it also has unforeseen benefits. Some trees like the Jack Pine or the giant Sequoia need this heat from fire to open their cones and release the seeds. Fire helps in domestic life as well with the refinery of metals, in the process of sterilization, and cooking food. God used fire not merely as judgment, but also as a sign of purification. It happened with Moses at the burning bush hearing the command to take off his sandals on holy ground. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were unharmed in the fiery furnace being protected by the presence of One who was like a son of the gods. This is the unforeseen benefit spoken about in today’s Gospel. The fire fallen upon Christ has become the purifying fire for His followers to stand firm in Him.

In the cold month of December, we call Jesus the Prince of Peace. Yet, during these hot months of summer Jesus comes saying, “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” Simeon uttered similar words when holding Mary’s infant child saying, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed…so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). How are we to reconcile the contradiction between the Jesus who saves sinners and the Jesus who cast fire upon the earth? A similar question pertains to whether doctors cause pain or give a cure and whether parents discipline their children or love them unconditionally. The answer is, both! In other words, the Jesus who saves sinners is the same one who sends the fire.

Christ brings the fire that divides at a most critical point. People will stand upon Him and His Word or on something else. A crowd of thousands was following him, but Jesus told His disciples, “For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three.” Christ places Himself as the critical point of division between all relationships, even the most intimate. As a professor from our seminaries states, “How people decide about him divides families and, in fact, divides the whole Church, into true and false, committed and uncommitted, true believers and hypocrites…It can even cause division and strife between our committed self and our uncommitted self, so that even inside you and me, there is division” (Concordia Pulpit 2010). There was no joking by Jeremiah with the false prophets deceiving Israel because, “Is not my word like fire says the Lord.” Neither was Jesus, the Word become flesh, joking around for He would cast fire from the cross. Jesus sealed the divide between God and man by His sacrifice, but among people division will remain.

Jeremiah the prophet described why the fiery division was among the house of Israel. He said, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.” St. Paul also describes a troublesome situation among the Christians in Corinth. “For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 Corinthians 11:18-19). Is Jesus to blame for causing the pain or is something else getting in the way? It might be personality conflicts, misunderstandings, and communication problems with the others. At the same time, beyond any individual person, “the preaching of the Word causes division, not because of God or because of the Word, but because of the utter sinfulness of man” (Bul’s notes).

Christ calls us to stand in the fire for our peace. The natural reaction is to avoid such a fire. It is to opt being comfortable with my sin, at ease with what the world says, and copping out of Christ’s call for obedience. Churches today have become more about convenience to a person’s life rather than the comforting good news of Jesus for the life of any person. The result is that comfortable people cannot change. Matter a fact; everything must change for them. Only by being in the fire does God keep changing the life of His Saints. A refining and purifying work comes from Jesus against the comforts created by our sinful nature. As the Savior said on the night before His cross, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). This is far from any worldly peace, but divides between those standing in the fire and others avoiding Christ because of the inconvenience. His cross is a costly price.

Baptism caused no visible pain to our lives, because the Father placed all punishment of our sin on the life of His Son. Jesus understood the sacrifice He would make out of love for sinners. He recognized the suffering that it would bring saying, “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!” What has taken place by the cross is now an exchange of one kind of suffering for another. Dying with Jesus in baptism means the hostility He faced also falls on those He has redeemed. It happened to the saints of old and it is what we should expect rather than imagine the cross a surprise. Sadly, such hostility is what we witness so brutally going on with those Christians in Egypt. The Epistle of Hebrews describes how such fire still has hope. It lies far outside of what we experience with an answer that says, “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

Christ promises the fire protects His people. It might get hot and make us sweat, but the hostility has a weakness. Jesus has bought your life by a sacrifice that none other could suffer or win for sinners. It is easy to feel shortchanged when trouble comes our way. This is how hostile we are to the cross. Yet, we confess our sins in thought, word, and deed only to find that God does not leave us stripped of life. He forgives, restores, and strengthens us. When things get hot, Jesus holds out His body and blood showing neither death nor this present life can separate us from Him. Trials and tribulations are actually a sign of protection. It stands against an unbelieving world that has no need of a crucified Savior. When God turns up the heat, He does it to burn up all works for a better faith hidden in the cross, hidden in suffering, hidden in His promises. The fire fallen upon Christ has become the purifying fire for His followers to stand firm in Him. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.