

“People Get Ready”

OK. Let’s stop right there. Who stole my Jesus? What happened to the Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world? All of a sudden I feel like I have been thrown back into my childhood and the fire and brimstone preachers I grew up with. Those preachers who told us how bad we were and how the Judgment Day was just around the corner and we better get right with God or we would be sorry for all eternity. This is a Jesus they could really get down with.

Whenever I get stuck in a passage like this I wonder about what is going on around the passage. In real estate the old saw is “location, location, location.” In biblical study the adage could be “context, context, context.” While today we read this section of Luke in isolation in truth it does not exist in isolation; far from it. Luke has taken us on a journey with Jesus since mid-June. Initially, his ministry was around the Sea of Galilee. but then Jesus makes an important decision to, “set his face toward Jerusalem.”¹ There is tension in his turning towards Jerusalem, and the tension increases with each new encounter. Even the good events have uncomfortable lessons in them. After the evangelism of the seventy disciples Jesus warns them not to rejoice in worldly success. When he visits Martha and Mary he tells us that keeping busy is not the answer. Jesus’ teaching goes against cultural norms.

Then there are those that challenge Jesus—a lawyer, and a disgruntled brother. He answers them with parables about a Good Samaritan and a foolish rich man. These are parables that turn the world upside down. Prior to that parable Israelites did not think that any Samaritan could be good. In contrast the rich were considered to be wise and favored by God, yet in the parable the rich man is a greedy fool.

Just a week ago we heard Jesus say to his disciples, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” And “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Jesus is pointing his flock of little lambs with gentleness and care toward a loving God who has “unfailing treasure” for them in heaven.²

Thus it is rather jarring to come to today’s Gospel where Jesus is calling for fire. What in the world happened? Well, the simple answer is that Luke 12:41-48 happened. The compilers of our lectionary left out eight verses that might help us understand what is going on in today’s lesson.

Throughout my life I have taught at schools and colleges. One of those times I was substituting for ten-days teaching one subject to middle schoolers. Five days in I was feeling that I was getting the rhythm of the day, to know the students, to enjoy teaching and interacting with them, and feel that many of them were enjoying the experience also. On that Thursday the morning started as usual with a hectic home room. Then I settled into the teaching periods which were all going well with lively discussions, good questions, and good energy. Then sixth period happened. This group did not seem to understand anything. I had to explain the same topic over and over again. I would no sooner finish one explanation than a hand would go up asking the exact same question. What was going on here? Where did the magic go? Where

¹ Luke 9:51

² Luke 12:32-34

was my little flock? What began as a day of success, pleasure, excitement, and joy had turned into exhausting disappointment.

So I imagine it was with Jesus. The skipped section of Luke begins with Peter asking Jesus, "Are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?" I imagine Jesus restraining himself with a sigh, and answering with another parable. This one is about slaves who are put in charge of their master's property. If the slave is diligent and faithful in his duties the master gives him more responsibility. If he is not faithful he is punished. Jesus ends with a famous verse saying, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." That is, he is telling Peter that the parable is for everyone, but because I have chosen you as disciples you have even more responsibility. It is at this point that today's reading picks up with fire.

What kind of fire is it? I expect many of us think Jesus is calling for a cleansing fire. But in The Gospel of Luke fire is indicative of passion and love. Remember the two disciples on the road to Emmaus whose hearts are burning within them as Jesus unfolds the scriptures. Later, at Pentecost, tongues of fire settle above the disciples' heads.

Jesus is frustrated that the fire is not kindled within his disciples. He wants all of us to burn with the love of God, but he realizes that before that happens many people will be alienated to one another because they do not understand. This is Jesus' cry of lament that is as loud and as anguished as when he shouts from the cross. In his frustration, he shouts that we know how to tell changes in the weather but we cannot recognize what is right in front of us. The Son of God is here, teaching, preaching, healing, and even goading us toward new thinking and a new Kingdom.

To put it in more mundane terms, Jesus has hit his sixth period. He is exhausted with the dumb questions from Peter, and the crowds who come to listen, but don't seem to comprehend. He is perturbed that the fire he wants to light in our hearts is not glowing brightly enough to cause the division that means the breaking up of the old order, and the breaking in of the Kingdom of God.

Be ready he calls again and again. Words that were echoed in the '60s by Curtis Mayfield when he sang:

"People get ready
There's a train a-coming
You don't need no baggage
You just get on board
All you need is faith
To hear the diesels humming
Don't need no ticket
You just thank the Lord."

Jesus called again and again for us to get ready, but it is not out of fear of punishment or the burning fires of Hades. He wants us to open our hearts to the fire of God's love. Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom has already broken in. It is here right now, all we need is the faith to make it burn brightly within us. The train is coming and all we need is faith in God and for that we can thank the Lord.