

TEXT: Luke 12:49-56
THEME: Jesus came to bring division
SUBJECT: Hypocrisy
TITLE: Interpreting the Present Time

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Messiah Moravian
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Who is this fire breathing Jesus whose mission is not peace but division? If Jesus' purpose was to sow division, by any measure he succeeded. We are polarized as a nation. The common good is an endangered species. Trust in institutions and in one another is as rare as sightings of a snow leopard.

The church itself is sufficient evidence of division with over 30,000 identifiably distinct "denominations." When conflict arises we prefer, it seems, division to the hard work of reconciliation.

Kennon Callahan, a church consultant, identifies three types of conflict found in every church. The first he names "best of families" conflict. The healthiest families/churches know conflict. Even the couple who remains passionately in love after twenty-five years of marriage knows conflict.

The second type of conflict is "dislocation of power." Many people feel increasingly powerless over the course of their lives. Decisions made by someone else, someone with the power to close a factory, move a headquarters, transfer or lay off half the employees are made without their consent. Bureaucracies protect the powerful and confound those in need.

People are left feeling apathy and anger. Anger born of a sense of powerlessness manifests as a grab for power in the church. Controversial cultural, social and political issues become wedge issues. These conflicts become personalized resulting in the demonization of the enemy.

The third type of conflict is occasioned by the gospel itself. In the reading from Jeremiah we hear God ask, "Is not my word like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" In the gospel reading Jesus proclaims, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

This is jarring for anyone raised on, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." I am afraid it is because we don't read the Bible, at least not with attention.

In Luke's telling of the story, angels announce Jesus' birth singing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace *among those whom God favors!*" Who does God favor? Mary tells us in the song she sings as a birth announcement. You will find this song in our *Book of Worship*, p 232. Let's pray it together.

If we haven't understood the message yet, Luke gives us Jesus' mission statement: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord."

In the Psalm (82) God asks, “How long will you judge unjustly, and show favor to the wicked? Save the weak and the orphan; defend the humble and the needy; rescue the weak and the poor; deliver them from the power of the wicked.”

The God of the Bible is a God of justice, a God who is particularly annoyed by justice denied. Fire is a symbol of God’s judgment. God’s judgment is not arbitrary, but the inherent consequence of failing to do what is necessary for the flourishing of life.

Jesus’ words in the Greek text are emphatic: “Fire I have come to cast.” The Gospel of Thomas reports Jesus saying, “Whoever is near me is near fire.” Whenever we think we can secure our lives in this world at the expense of others, this fire breathing Jesus calls us, “Hypocrites!”

What makes us hypocrites? A hypocrite (charlatan - Hart’s translation) is one who pretends not to know what must be done because he doesn’t want to pay the price of doing it.

Yesterday, my smart phone made an annoying, attention grabbing sound at least four times to warn me of severe thunderstorms and then of flooding. With our sophisticated technologies - satellites, radar, computer models - we have become proficient at reading the weather. But what of reading the present time?

“It is complicated,” we say, when confronted with our role in climate change, July having been the hottest month recorded since 1880 when records were first kept. “It is complicated,” we say as children are gunned down in school, worshippers are slaughtered in a synagogue, shoppers are murdered at Walmart. “It is complicated,” we say as the wealth gap continues to widen threatening the very stability of the social order. “It is complicated,” we say as the integrity of our elections is undermined, compromising our democracy.

Forecasting the weather is complicated, but that doesn’t stop IBM Watson from interpreting the data and saving lives. Do we really not know how to interpret the present time or are we unwilling to pay the price of bringing good news to the poor who are most adversely affected by these crises?

Resistance to doing what is required will come from powerful interest groups, from bastions of privilege, from our own families, from our own hearts and minds. We can, as many have from Jeremiah’s day to ours, find prophets who will lie to us, prophets who profit by selling us straw for wheat.

It is not that complicated. We will either do what is necessary for the flourishing of life, all life, or we will all suffer the consequences. Either we will realize we cannot be saved apart from the salvation of the poor, or the inherent consequences of our greed will consume us in an unquenchable fire.

May the God of hope,
fill you with all joy and peace
in believing through the power
of the Holy Spirit. Amen.