

Oh boy. Y'all, I'm a little nervous about my sermon this week. And if this already feels like *deja vu*, you're right 'cause last week where we heard one of the most challenging lines in scripture, this week we hear one of the most *potentially* damaging. "Do you think I bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I bring division!" Just to be clear, this is Jesus talking. Peace? Nope. Division? Ah yes, the Gospel in a nutshell. Whatever happened to all that love God, love your neighbor stuff? Whatever happened to the Messiah of mercy, the Messiah of forgiveness, the Messiah of "my burden is light?" We're so accustomed to hearing Jesus' comfortable words that we don't really know what to do with the discomfort that comes with something like this. Do you think I bring peace to the earth? Nope, I bring division! How could this possibly be the same Jesus we've been listening at for the past, oh, I don't know, 2000 years?

The truth is, I think my knee jerk to that first line and the weirdness that follows misses a deeply important point that Jesus is trying to make. We'll get there. But first, I want to lean into why following the knee jerk can be so damaging. Jesus starts off saying he brings fire to the earth, a fire he really wishes would just get on with burning everything down, in part because it's just so dang stressful bringing all this division all the time. And then he lists off some examples of just how serious this division will be. It's Civil War-level stuff. Households split in two, father against son, mother against daughter, in-laws against everybody. And then he tacks on this weird thing about meteorologists keeping an eye on how the winds are blowing.

Ok, so when I tell stories about my growing up, when I'm in the pulpit, I sorta curate the kinds of stories I'll tell. I don't mind telling hard ones, but I do kinda lean into the side of my memories that have a sweetness to them. I don't particularly like to spread out the dirty laundry, you know? It's typically not a great thing to listen to for y'all, and it wouldn't be all that fair to the folks that aren't here to defend themselves. Also, it's not my job to use this pulpit as a therapy couch and the gathered congregation as my therapist. But once in a rare while, I think it can actually be helpful to go there, to pull back the curtain and reveal a little less Lake Wobegon and a little more Yoknapatawpha County.

The way I grew up in those Arkansas hills, my people were fiercely independent. They did not trust the government (and who could blame 'em), they didn't trust folks that weren't from around here, they didn't trust neighbors or heathens or divergence from the norm. They had a hard time with truth, living a Pilate-like existence with the question "What is truth?" rattling underneath every encounter. Secondguessing was second nature. But the one thing they could all agree on was Jesus. I mean, they agreed that Jesus was Lord, but just how you go about living that out, well, that was as big a source of debate as the justice or lack thereof behind imminent domain laws. What religion really came down to was a strict literalism, a load of guilt, and a clear definition of who was in and who was not. And God help you if you was not.

There was also an enormous focus on the coming end times. Jesus'll one day come and set all things right. And when Jesus does come, you better believe he's not gonna be a laughing hippie. He's coming as a warrior, he's coming with a flaming sword in hand, drawing hard lines, sorting out sheep and goats, and cleansing this world of any that oppose him. It's frightening and it's powerful, and in a weird way for a people beaten down by generations of Powers That Be, it's actually kinda hopeful. Well, it's hopeful, assuming you're on the right side when that warrior Christ comes. Oh, and that predicting the weather bit? What a great line! I come from a people deeply tied to the land and its rhythms. You know rain's coming in a day or two from the tightness in your hip. You know when the seasons'll change from the shape of a shadow in a persimmon seed. And all the more, you know when Jesus is coming because things are the way they are. False prophets and abominations and corrupt leaders, those are the farmer's almanac of faith. With a fire-bringing Jesus on the

horizon, you better get right and you better get right fast. Don't stray now, especially not now, 'cause soon is sooner than you think.

Well here's why that framework has the potential to be so damaging: in the lead up to Jesus' return, when the stakes are so high, who gets to decide what to take literally or what you should feel guilty about or who's in and who's out? And while corrupt politicians are nothing new, who gets to decide which ones are prosecuted versus which ones are persecuted? No wonder all those centuries ago, when facing Jesus and the signs of those times, Pilate himself shook his head and pondered "what is truth?" Earlier this year, when I was laid up with Covid and worried for my health and my family's, I reached out to my people down South. I was hopeful that my own illness would help them to see just how dangerous a game of viral roulette they were playing. They'd adopted a flippant response to a global pandemic and brushed off a million plus American deaths as "politician talk." Well that conversation led to an ultimatum. They drew one of those hard lines, with themselves, faith, and Jesus the Conquering Messiah on one side and me, science, and Fauci The False Prophet on the other. And rattling underneath it all was a certainty that everyone involved knew the answer to Pilate's question. "What is truth? Truth is what I believe, and that's how I know I'm on God's side and *they're* wrong." And that's why this whole passage of Jesus and fire and division and interpreting the signs of the times has so much potential for damage. It just makes so much sense to read it that way, and once we do, it also feels kinda good to know where we land, because of course, where *we* land is in the know, and we know something other people don't. Oh, it's so dang tempting.

But I wonder what would've been different in that conversation with my family, shoot, I wonder what would've been different in how I grew up, what could be different in those deep, dark Ozark hills if we read this passage differently. First off, Jesus comes to bring fire to the earth. What if, and I know this is gonna sound crazy, but what if that's a metaphor? Instead of imagining Jesus descending with uncontrollable, literal wildfires razing everything in sight, what if we imagine Jesus like a silversmith leaning over a crucible with fire not all consuming and deadly but controlled and purifying. I'm real freaked out by fire elemental Jesus but actually kinda comforted by melt off my imperfections Jesus. For that to be available to us and to our institutions, too? Woah. That's actually, well it's almost exciting. Yes, bring *that* fire, like, yesterday!

Ok, so Jesus comes to bring division? Well, I mean, yes. I think he does, but I don't think division is the goal. After all, in a whole bunch of other places, Jesus says he does come to bring peace and justice. If you believe in the things Jesus preaches, if you've ever actually strived for justice and peace and really have tried to love your neighbor and sometimes even tried to love your enemy, then you know just how resistant the ways of this world are to the love and justice and peace and mercy he brings. Jesus was revolutionary then and he's still revolutionary now. Look at what happens when calls for justice don't line up with our own politics...or what happens when they do. And look at what happens when we ask for even the most despicable to be loved. The things we preach and read and say (and hopefully do) will bring division not because they're meant to divide but because we haven't burned off enough of our impurities as a society to risk uniting over truth. I don't think Jesus comes with the intent to divide. I think Jesus comes knowing that what he's asking us to do will not be easy and will be resisted.

And I actually think this bit about the weather reinforces all that. Look around you. You know enough about the way things are around here to know when a storm's a-brewin'. Surely you can see with the same confidence that "the present time" is no present, at least not always. It's got its moments, but there is far too much injustice, inequality, and insanity for things to remain as they are. Something's gotta change. We know that.

Now, there are some who will make calls to burn it all down. Start over. Everything is so broken that it can't be repaired. Maybe. But I think there's something to this purifying approach. The Good News of Jesus is

that “brokenness” doesn’t have to mean “ruined.” It’s a temporary state, and it can get better. It’s not always easy and it’s not always comfortable, but it is possible. I don’t know about you, but I’d much rather sit in a divine, metaphorical crucible than face the harsh and final fires of human ultimatums. Jesus asks, “Do you think I bring peace to this earth?” Jesus, I wish it were that easy but I’m actually kinda relieved that you know how hard it is to do what you’ve asked us to.