

**SERMON**  
**“Fires of Discernment”**  
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**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

Luke 7:18-23

**Luke 12: 49-56**

“I come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 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.”

He also said to the crowd, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’: and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. 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?”

## SERMON

Many of you have come here this morning seeking a place of comfort and quiet consolation. Your life is on fast-forward, awash in a sea of change and innovation; busy, busy, busy. I've talked to lots of people over the years who say that this is the major reason why they come to church—to center themselves, to touch base with that which is stable and dependable, to get grounded.<sup>1</sup>

We want our Jesus to be a soothing friend that calms us and unplugs us from the chaos of life. We want our church like Jesus to be a healer and a lover. And back in Luke 7, it seemed that was what we were getting.

John sends two of his disciples to go ask Jesus if he is the one or if they are waiting for another. In Luke's gospel, John announces that the one coming is to be greater than he, but he does not tell us the "who". John does not identify who the one coming is to be because...he did not know. We cannot say John knew back when he baptized Jesus, because Luke does not have John baptize Jesus. I think the John of Luke was hopeful that Jesus was indeed "the one" and yet uncertain—uncertain because John expected a **fiery reformer**, a prophet who would call the people to accountability. Instead, Jesus came bringing grace and healing. The tension between the Jesus depicted in John's preaching, and the message Jesus sends back to John seems to indicate that Jesus' ministry was taking a different course than expected. John speaks of the one who will baptize you with fire and Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Yes sir, Jesus was doing some mighty loving and healing back then. If only he had left it at that, then we could have our soothing church. But oh no. Here comes chapter 12.

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, "Fire!" p.34.

In chapter 12:49 he starts playing with fire. He says, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.”

I confess I somewhat dread coming to this particular text in the lectionary, and this Jesus who’s messing with fire. It all makes me rather nervous.

William Willimon reminds us that once the Israelites were freed from Egyptian slavery, they wanted to go back to being slaves again. “You know, at least as Pharaoh’s slaves, we had three meals a day. With Yahweh, we don’t know which steps to take next out here in the wilderness.”

In response did God say, “OK, I’ll let you slip back into slavery”. Or, “I’ll slow things down and let you take up residence in the wilderness”. No. God says, “I’ll give you fire, a pillar of fire leading into the darkness, pulling you into my future. The discernment fires, they are a-burning.

Jesus says, “I come to kindle the same exodus fire. I’m coming to take you places you’ve never been. You, who thought I was going to just cuddle you indefinitely, are in for a surprise.”

“Moses hunkered down out in Midian. He had killed a man back in Egypt. Moses is on the lam. He’s trying to blend in with the wallpaper, posing as a shepherd. A bush burst into flames.”<sup>2</sup> The discernment fires they are a-burning.

“There’s a voice. ‘I’m sending you Moses to speak for me to the King.’ ” (And we wonder what religion has to do with politics.) “Jesus says, “I’m consumed with that fire and I intend to ignite you!” The discernment fires they are a-burning, and Jesus is frustrated. He’s frustrated that we could be so darn good at predicting the weather, but can’t interpret the present. It seems we are clueless on how to recognize a sign even when our britches are on fire.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.34.

Bruce Nolan, played by Jim Carrey, is a TV reporter who believes the universe is stacked against him. Everything but everything is going wrong in his life. His girlfriend hands him some prayer beads that her kindergarten children gave her saying, "I think you have more need of these than I." Somewhere into the mess of his life he decides to give the beads and prayer a chance. He prays for God to send him a sign. All around him the movie audience see the signs for which he prayed; a billboard on the side of the road, a truck loaded with signs pointing him in a direction, and a beggar who holds up signs for him to see throughout the movie. All of these Bruce heeds not. Until, he is hit upside the head by a semi. Sometimes it takes a powerful force for God to get our attention.

The savior John looked for has arrived--the fire throwing savior who bids us look, look for the signs of change, look for the discernment fires calling us to go to today's Pharaohs to set the people free, to go address the wrongs of our time, to set in motion the wheels of God's kingdom.

I know, I know. You'd rather shore up the building making it even more secure. fixed, and permanent. We would rather buy a few more fire alarms. We'd rather just move along, following the order of worship, going through the motions, pews bolted down, doors locked, preacher droning on, with ushers helping the people get comfortable. That may be what we want, but this morning the fires of discernment, they are a-burning—for the fiery reformer has arrived. We can choose to discern his movement among us...or secure our blinders and purchase more fire extinguishers.

With the coming of the fiery reformers, division, strife, and chaos will certainly follow. We've seen it time and again in our history. When that fiery reformer tapped Martin Luther King, Jr. on his shoulder to lead his people out of bondage, look what happened.

In September of 1963 Martin Luther King electrified a crowd of 200,000 people with his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Even after the passage of 47 years, his words still stir the heart and kindle a burning passion.

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”*

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*

Our God is a dreamer that informs human dreams. God’s dreams burned passionately in the soul of the man from Nazareth. Jesus knew by heart the dream God spoke through the prophet Isaiah.

*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. . . He will judge between nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.*

Interesting, don’t you think. God provokes dreams of unity and motivates prophecies of God’s desires for a world without war or a world even training for war. Yet Jesus, the Prince of Peace, says, “I have come to send fire on the earth, fire! Do you think I’ve come to bring peace? No! Peace is boring! Strife, division! I’ve come to split up families, divide homes, turn father against son, mother against daughter.” The fires of discernment they are a-burning.

Deep down in your soul I know you've felt them. When your heart was stirred and you felt the tug of God's dreams, God's intension for your world. Certainly you've known it in your bones, that we cannot exclude anyone from the reach of God's love.

Frederich Buechner recounts in *Sacred Journey*, the day he signed a contract for his first novel. As he left the office, he ran into a former college classmate who was working as a messenger boy. "I was, I thought," says Buechner, "on the brink of fame and fortune. But instead of feeling any pride or sense of superior accomplishment, by comparison I remember a great and unheralded rush of something like sadness, almost like shame." In reflection of his luck and his classmate's lack of luck, Buechner concludes, "All I can say now is that something small but unforgettable happened inside me as the result of that chance meeting—some small flickering of the truth that, in the long run, there can be no real joy for anybody until there is joy finally for us all—and I can take no credit for it. . . . What I felt was something better and truer than I was."<sup>3</sup>

Have you ever felt such a flicker? A time when you knew something was terribly wrong or terribly right? A time when you knew in your bones God's intention for all human beings to become what they in fact are, brothers and sisters. If you want to practice discernment, if you want to pay attention to God, fan that flicker—for God is trying God's best to show you God's intention, God's desire, God's hope that yet another will pick up God's dream and run with it, even though it may put you in a whirlwind of conflict and division.

The fires of discernment they are a-burning. Will you let them stir you into action, to take a stand, to make a feeble attempt, to become an active part of the Body of Christ struggling to bring the purifying fire of God's love to the earth?

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<sup>3</sup> William Barry, SJ, *Paying Attention to God*, p.59-60.