

Sermon for Pentecost 10 (Proper 15) 2022 | Church of St. Paul and the Redeemer

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"You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Well, fellow hypocrites, that was awkward. I am assuming that you, like me, are no experts at interpreting the present time. I wish we were. Jesus seems to have no patience with indecision. Jesus plays hardball. He wants us to take sides. Look around, he says. Draw some conclusions. Get off your duff. Act. Easy for him to say. Just how are we supposed to act? What are we supposed to do? Well, for Jesus anyway, at least the Jesus we encounter in today's gospel, answering that question is as easy as interpreting the weather. If you see a storm cloud, it's going to rain. If you feel the south wind blowing, prepare for scorching heat. If you want to follow Jesus, well...

Well, what?

Right.

Let's do a thought experiment. Let's take this dangerous reading from Luke's gospel this morning and try to interpret it in the way it looks like Jesus would have interpreted it. Let's interpret this scripture passage in the light of the present time, as if what Jesus said were a clear prediction of where we are today, and what is likely to happen to us. Wing-nut Christians have practiced this kind of predictive hocus-pocus with the New Testament for centuries. It is an especially welcome pastime among American Christians of a certain literalist, right-wing bent, for whom the Bible is a clearly written instruction book entitled "Spiritual Warfare Made Easy,". So, let's try it. What happens when we interpret this scripture "in the light of the present time"?

The results are unsettling.

Jesus said, "I come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" No problem here. As the climate changes for the worst, there seems to be fire everywhere. Not just forest fires. There's also the firestorm created by tanks and artillery attacks in Kyiv, Mariupol, the Crimea, or the Donbas. Or Highland Park. Or here on the South Side. Fire, that part we get.

Jesus said, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed." Stress. Stress, too, we get. When Jesus talked about "a baptism with which to be baptized," he was likely talking about his inevitable arrest and execution. Not really a worry for anyone here, I trust. But stress is still stress. Climate catastrophe. Russians shelling the largest nuclear plant in Europe. A resurgence of Trump and his minions. Guns everywhere.

Next. Jesus said, "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division."

Ok, now it's getting scary. Just doom-scroll through the news. Division has become a global trademark. Leave aside the big divisions: Russia vs Ukraine, or Nancy Pelosi vs. The People's Republic of China, or Donald Trump vs. Anything Legal. Let's get personal. I imagine that everyone in this room has experienced some kind of division in our own family lives, the kind of thing Jesus is saying when he predicts that father will be against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Of course, these kinds of domestic divisions have been the stuff of fiction writers and cable showrunners since the time of Homer.

But Jesus is not just talking about harmless domestic spats. He is talking about deeper divisions—like when a father

throws a gay son out of the house, or a mother looks away when her daughter is being abused, or when a parent refuses to acknowledge the marriage partner that their son or daughter has chosen to love. Or when, as happened so often in the 20th century, and may well happen again in this one, when an older generation sends a younger generation off to fight in a war somewhere for reasons unclear and too often nefarious. We all know something about division.

Let's face it: maybe those wing-nut Biblical literalists are on to something.

Look, I was trained as a Biblical scholar. I was trained to read New Testament passages like this in their original cultural, political, and theological context. Maybe the carefully reconstructed figure whom scholars call "the historical Jesus" did say something like this. I suspect he did. He likely did not mince words. But whether Luke's account is historically accurate is not really the point. This is theology, not history, that we are reading—a deeply practical theology in fact. What Luke reports Jesus as saying about the present time is exactly what persecuted members of an underground Jesus movement would have needed to hear. So many of them had resisted family norms to declare themselves Christian. So many of these new Christians thought about the present times in apocalyptic terms. The end times—when Roman oppression would be ended, when the Pharisees would see the light, as Paul the Pharisee did; when Jesus would return in glory and trample the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored—for these first hearers of the gospel, these end-times were imminent. So when they heard from Luke's Gospel that Jesus had read the signs of the times, and predicted the very divisions they were now enduring, well, yes, that's it. They get it.

But what about us? Here's the kicker when it comes to placing the New Testament in historical context. The job is not done. The job is just beginning. You don't just close the book and walk away, claiming that "That was then, this is now." Instead, you work the moral translation. You ask yourself, "If that was then, and that's what Jesus thought

about it, and if a lot about "then" looks a lot like "now", what would Jesus expect us now to *do*?"

Well, that's when we look at the rest of Luke's Gospel, at the parts that remind us of what the real Reign of God will look like: a time when the peacemakers will be blessed, and the mighty will be cast down from their seats. A time when the hated and snubbed Samaritan will turn out to be the person with the most compassion. A time when the long-lost son will be welcomed back with open arms, regardless of how much his elder brother will seethe in anger. You contemplate all the empty seats at your wedding feast, when all the proper people you invited have made their excuses, and you send your servants out to invite in all the improper people. In Luke's day they were called the lame, the blind, and the poor. In ours we call them refugees.

So that's our job, as we struggle to interpret the present time. Our job is to read these scriptures, and then to do the translation. To help usher in the reign of God as best we can—whether it's expanding the Food Pantry, or working to ensure women's health, or calling out injustice when we see it, holding politicians and Supreme Court justices accountable for the consequences of their actions, doing all we can to make peace and work for justice in our violent city streets.

My fellow hypocrites, as faithful Christians that's the least that we can do: loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, especially in these days of hatred and prejudice, especially when we find misogyny, racism, and xenophobia masquerading as Christian righteousness. Love your neighbor as you love yourselves, Jesus tells us. Or given these selfish times, we might even go Jesus one step further and learn to love our neighbors even *more* than we love ourselves.

As Jesus would say, there is no commandment greater than this.