

⁴⁹“I came to throw fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already ignited. ⁵⁰But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is finished! ⁵¹Do you think that I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵²Yes, from now on there will be five divided in one household: three against two, and two against three. ⁵³They 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 her mother-in-law.”

Why did Jesus come? We celebrate his coming at Christmas every year. We sing songs of praise to the baby born in Bethlehem and placed in a manger. But why did Jesus come? Was it for peace? Well, that’s what the angel choir sang to the shepherds in the fields that night: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward mankind.”

But today, Jesus tells us he didn’t come to bring peace on earth. And as we see throughout his ministry, Jesus doesn’t align with the common conception we sometimes have of Jesus the peacenik hippy. Some of Jesus’ preaching and teaching is harsh. It calls people out for sin. It threatens violent ends. The section of Luke 12 before us today is one of those sections. Jesus is not being go along to get along, not one bit. Why? Because the road to peace is anything but peaceful.

“I have a baptism to undergo.” These words might be the most surprising in this chapter. Because we know that Jesus had already been baptized by John the Baptist. What is this baptism, or washing, Jesus is talking about? He’s not talking about that baptism in the Jordan River, but this metaphorical baptism he’s talking about here is certainly connected to his baptism from John.

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the Spirit came down in the form of a dove and the voice of the Father marked him to the world as God’s chosen Messiah. This began Jesus’ ministry. But what was Jesus’ ministry leading to? What was the point? Why did Jesus come? Listen to what Jesus says a little bit later to James and John, because he gives insight into what this baptism is that he’s talking about here while also explaining his purpose for coming: “They said to him, ‘Promise that we may sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with?’ ‘We can,’ they replied. Jesus told them, ‘You will drink the cup that I am going to drink and be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with. But to sit at my right or at my left is not for me to give; rather, these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.’”

Back to Luke 12, Jesus follows up the comment on his coming baptism with this: “and how distressed I am until it is finished!” Are you starting to get what Jesus is talking about? He’s talking about the suffering he’s about to go through. He’s talking about the beatings and the humiliation. He’s talking about the cross and the grave. But even more than that, he’s talking about the separation from the Father he is about to endure. He’s talking about the literal hell he is about to face. But what will come at the end? He uses the same word here that he uses at the cross: “Finished.” He’s not looking forward to the suffering itself, but what comes at the end of his sufferings. While he doesn’t mention it here, we know what it is. Victory over sin, death and hell. Forgiveness of every sin. Peace with God forever. Jesus comes to bring peace. But peace comes at a cost. That cost is his perfect and innocent life. That cost is the blood of God himself. Jesus comes to do this for us.

Jesus’ baptism of death and resurrection brings about change in our status before God. The Apostle Paul writes this about our baptisms of water and the word: “Or do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him by this baptism into his death, so that just as he was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too would also walk in a new life.” Our status before God is changed. We have new life with Christ, as we die with him and rise with him in baptism.

But beyond our status with God, Jesus’s baptism of death and resurrection also brings about a change in our lives. He says, “I came to throw fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already ignited.” That sounds violent and destructive. Again, this is not the Jesus who refuses to step on toes that we often imagine him to be. For perfection to come, sin must be purged. Like gold, what is perfect must be refined with fire. Jesus does not come to do things halfway. He doesn’t come to remove a little sin but leave the rest. He comes to make all things perfect. And that means burning away everything that is not.

“Do you think that I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” No peace? But isn’t Jesus the Prince of Peace? Didn’t we hear that his birth brought peace on earth? Why the seeming contradiction? Well, many of his followers in the crowd think that he’s come to bring world peace, to ascend to the throne of Israel and become an earthly king. They think they are about to start experiencing peace on earth.

But Jesus doesn’t come to bring peace in the kingdom of the world. He comes to bring peace in the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. And that means, to be a part of God’s kingdom is to share in Jesus’ baptism of suffering. Jesus is giving fair warning. Following him will not be a life where nothing bad ever happens to you again. Quite the opposite. As he says to James and John a little later, “You will drink the cup that I am going to drink and be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with.” James and John are going to suffer for being Jesus’ disciples, and James is going to be killed for following Jesus.

In this section, Jesus doesn't just speak about suffering in general, but division specifically. So, let me give you fair warning: Living in Christ is going to create division in your life, just as Jesus created division wherever he went. There will be people who despise us for our faith. There will be those who don't mind us believing what we want to believe but become upset when we try and share it with them. People we love may grow cold to us. Some may even threaten us, especially when we speak to the truth to Satan's lies.

Division is the point though. It's not just something that unfortunately happens to Christians. It is a necessary part of our lives of faith, as God uses division to hold us in his truth. And this is not to say we are without sin, not one bit, but God uses this hostility to keep his children separated from spiritually dangerous situations. He brings division to show the world what joy in the kingdom of God looks like, a joy that does not match what the world rejoices in, like temporary victories that turn out to be empty.

We ought not look for division, but when division comes, we should embrace it. It's ok if society around me blames Christ's teaching for the world's ills. Any assumption that the Christian church was ever going to bring about world peace flies in the face of what Jesus says here. It's ok if my nominally Christian neighbor thinks I'm a fool or a square for actually living out my faith and denying myself what scripture tells me is empty and destructive. I'm not here to please my neighbor. I'm here to please Jesus, the one who suffered in my place to rescue me from death. It's ok if people hate me, even if they threaten me or harm me. Jesus says these things are to be expected, as people come into contact with harsh truths about sin that they don't want to hear or the freeing message of the gospel that seems too good to be true to many. And I'm not going to play the victim when those things happen, because I'm not a victim. I'm an heir of eternity. I'm a recipient of Jesus' promise of peace, and you are too.

The road to peace is anything but peaceful. Just as Christ suffered in our place, we will suffer on the way to eternity. But take heart. You are not on your way to earning the glory of heaven, because it's already yours in Jesus. So, embrace the fire and the division. These things must happen for total peace to come. And it is already yours in Jesus. Amen.