

**10 Pentecost**  
**August 14, 2022**

“I have come to bring fire to the earth! And you thought I had come to bring peace! Strife and division—that is what I’ve come to bring! I’ve come to split up families, divide homes, turn fathers against sons and mothers against daughters! It is fire that I am bringing!”

Do you think maybe Jesus got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning? You talk about fire and brimstone preaching-wow! He really let the congregation have it that day. I don’t know about you but when I hear today’s Gospel I feel like saying, “Jesus, lighten up a little bit.” You can save that old-fashioned, loud, Bible-thumping, fire, and brimstone kind of preaching for someone else. That kind of preaching may be just fine for our more “conservative” brothers and sisters.

But we’re Episcopalians. We don’t go in for that type of preaching. We don’t come to church to be yelled at and made to feel guilty. We just want to slow down for an hour—slow down from the frenetic rat race of life, share a little time with some friends, enjoy the music, and enjoy some peace and quiet and comfort. Well, you’re safe this morning. There will be no Bible thumping from the pulpit today. There will be no fire and brimstone this Sunday. At least there will be no brimstone. But I would like for us to think a little bit about fire this morning.

From earliest recorded history, there has been something strange and mysterious, almost miraculous about fire. The discovery of fire changed the life of primitive people forever. Fire made possible a settled, rather than a nomadic existence. In countless ways, fire has changed the way people live. From the warming of their caves and providing light to illumine the darkness; from the industrial revolution to traveling into distant space, fire has been indispensable to human life.

Fire of course, is also something we fear. Every year we see images of forest fires across the country. Just this past week, the fires in California, Oregon, and Nebraska consumed thousands of acres. We see pictures of burned-out homes and the anguish on the faces of people who have lost everything. For good or ill, fire changes things. Fire transforms things. Nothing is ever the same after a fire.

In scripture, fire plays a prominent place in the religious experience. The word “fire” is found over 500 times in the Bible. From Genesis through Revelation, “fire” is a common theme and metaphor.

A burning bush caught the attention of Moses, and he began to hear the voice of God. In Luke’s account of the Pentecost, we hear of, “tongues of fire” sent by the Holy Spirit as gifts to proclaim the Gospel by word and deed. Fire is often used as an instrument of purification and transformation. The writer of Hebrews simply states, “Our God is a consuming fire.”

So, what is Jesus’ message to us in his “fire and brimstone” sermon? Where is the loving compassionate, peacemaking Jesus in these very harsh, very “hot” verses? Jesus’ words are one more reminder that the peace he offers comes with a price. The peace he offers demands a change—a purification, a transformation of our lives.

The vision many people of Jesus today is very different from the Jesus we read about this morning. Jesus is often portrayed in such a way that he makes no one feel uncomfortable. In our attempt to make everyone “feel good,” we reduce our vision of Jesus to a sweet small baby with angels hovering all around, or to someone who only talks about the lilies of the valley or the birds of the air. A benign God who offends no one.

And perhaps that vision of Jesus has become all too often the model for the modern church as well. A church that has become a feel good, I'm ok, you're ok kind of place in which to come for solace only and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. A church that asks its members to carry only very "light yokes" and a church that only speaks sugary words of love.

My brothers and sisters, that is not the Jesus or the church in Luke's Gospel! Jesus was a troublemaker. Jesus was an agitator. Jesus was a community organizer. Jesus was a radical and a revolutionary who came to overthrow the status quo and transform the world.

Jesus did not get into any trouble for just talking about lilies of the fields and birds of the air. He started getting into trouble when he started "bucking" the system. He got into trouble when he saw someone who needed healing and he just ignored the Sabbath law forbidding work and went right on in and healed them. He got in trouble when he hung out with the wrong kind of people—prostitutes and tax collectors. He got into trouble when he turned over the tables and kicked the money changers out of the synagogue. Jesus was a troublemaking, lawbreaking, revolutionary firebrand, and agitator!

How many of us could raise their hand and recall ever once being tagged as a troublemaking, lawbreaking, agitating firebrand Christian disciple? And yet, as people who claim the name Christian, we have been called to be revolutionists! We are called to model our lives, and to grow into the likeness of Christ. We are called to love all that Jesus loved and to be the enemy to everything that crucified him.

Don Armentrout, my Church History Professor at seminary had unique and humorous ways of making a point. He once asked this question in class, "If you were arrested and charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

Episcopalians are sometimes, perhaps unfairly, perhaps not, accused of being the "frozen chosen." We are sometime accused of wanting our church to be a quiet, safe, status quo refuge where we can escape from the "troubles" of the world and have our own needs met and where nice folks can feel good about themselves.

Today's Gospel is a sharp reminder that Jesus is calling us to be more than a "feel good" church. We are called to be a community where the love of God is abundantly made manifest every single day. Jesus is looking for people who are "fired up"; people who are "ignited" by the Holy Spirit and who are filled with a burning desire to share with others the light of his hope, his love, his mercy, and his forgiveness. Yes, Jesus does offer us peace, but it is a peace that comes with a price. The peace Jesus offers demands a change—a purification and a transformation. The way of peace is the way of the cross.

Our world remains a divided place—politically, racially, socioeconomically. As in Jesus' time we know all too well the tragedy of divided families. Division seems to be the norm. Unity at whatever level is only going to begin to occur when people become inflamed with God's love and God's claim on our lives. That love lived out every day is the only thing that can break down the walls that divide and bring unity out of division.

I want to share with you a prayer that I believe captures the essence of today's Gospel. The prayer was written by noted writer and retired Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon. Let us pray. "Lord Jesus, ignite us, set us on fire, rekindle us, and enflame us in passionate love for you. Draw us out of the confines of our safe and predictable faith and out to the high seas of an adventuresome discipleship. May we burn brightly for your love. Amen."