

The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke

Part 14: Fire-Bringer

Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: Luke 12:1-7; 49-53

I. Be afraid! Do not be afraid!

Does Jesus want us to let go of our fears or be scared out of our wits? In today's passage, Jesus seems to want it both ways!

On the one hand, Jesus tells us not to worry so much about our lives. "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." Yet Jesus then warns us to "fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!"

To fear God, or not to fear God, that is the question Jesus sets before us. And as with many things connected with Jesus, appearances can be deceiving!

In the 4th Century, St. Augustine established the "gold standard" when it comes to confusing or problematic passages in Scripture, which became known as the Rule of Love. He said that if anything in Scripture appears to contradict God's command to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves, then we should consider our interpretation to be suspect, or the Scripture itself.

How can you love a god who would cast you into a fiery torture-chamber for eternity if you fail to please this god in a certain way? Far easier to love the God of the sparrow, who counts you worthy of God's love and grace just because you are You.

So it is tempting to invoke Augustine's Rule of Love and throw out the god of hell while keeping the God of the sparrow. Yet it is wise to first be skeptical of our interpretation of Scripture before simply casting it aside as false.

As we've observed before, the "hell" Jesus spoke of was not a fiery torture chamber but a garbage dump. The word translated as "hell" is Gehenna – the dump outside the Jerusalem wall.

When Jesus spoke of Gehenna, he turned the spot preeminently associated with the burning of physical garbage into a metaphor for disposing of spiritual garbage. Gehenna is the spiritual garbage dump where all that is not of God is disposed of.

Seen for what Jesus meant it to be, Gehenna is an incredibly beautiful and powerful metaphor for freedom. Gehenna is the place where you cast everything that truly weighs you down in order that you may live free of burden and constraint. When you hate your enemies, your hatred belongs in Gehenna so that, free of hatred, you may become an instrument of God's love and peace. When you judge and condemn others, you should divert every ounce of your self-righteousness to the fires of Gehenna so that you may become an instrument of God's grace.

Of course, Jesus also warns us to fear God who has the authority to cast our soul into Gehenna. Yet this is a beautiful thing, too. Gehenna burns and destroys spiritual trash. If there is no love within you, but only hatred, no grace within you, but only self-righteous, no gentleness within you, but only brutality, and no compassion within you, but only coldness of heart, would you not prefer to die?

You can kill the body but not the soul. If your response to the love and grace God gives you in this life is to be hateful and condemning; if the compassion and gentleness God has shown you in this life has produced only cold-heartedness and brutality within you – if you've hated and rejected everything that is godly in this life – can you imagine how miserable you will be in the next life, where all of this grace, love, and compassion is intensified by many orders of magnitude?

What Jesus is getting at is that if you entirely reject God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, God doesn't torture you. *You're torturing yourself!* And God is gracious enough to put you out of your misery, casting it into the place where all misery belongs – in a place that will burn it away until it runs out of fuel and is finally extinguished. The only soul that Gehenna is capable of extinguishing is a soul that literally contains no love or compassion; a soul therefore that has no yearning for God but only revulsion.

So there is no afterlife for someone with no love within them. That's a hopeful thing, not a terrible thing. For someone whose heart continues to beat but is completely devoid of love or compassion, the most horrifying thing of all is continuing to live. If you have even a modicum of love, compassion, or yearning within you, you also can rejoice in Gehenna, because it is the place where you can empty all your spiritual trash and be rid of it. It is a place where those who love God cast down their burdens.

II. Fire-Bringer

Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" In other words, he wishes to bless the world – not curse it – by bringing the fires of Gehenna to us in *this* life rather than making us wait for the afterlife to be free. Remember, Jesus believed that heaven is a Realm we not only find later but NOW. Therefore we don't have to wait until later to be free. We can be free right NOW!

While Jesus lived among us, he traveled the countryside, cajoling the Pharisees to rid themselves of their wasteful self-righteousness, exhorting those who turned up their noses at Samaritans to see them as "good," and "neighbor." He invited anyone who

would listen to quit wasting their lives in fear, judgment, hatred, and condemnation. “Let go! Burn it up! Free yourselves of these burdens so that you may walk lightly upon the earth, even dance; so that you may know heaven’s joy in the here-and-now.”

Once Jesus was freed of his physical body, the cleansing fire that burned within him was unconstrained by physical or temporal limitation. It could fan out beyond Israel’s borders, inflaming the whole world with purifying love. Why do you think that the symbol of Pentecost is the symbol of fire – and specifically fire that sets the hearts of all the world’s peoples burning within them. The early Church knew that the Holy Spirit was none other than the fiery, joyous presence of the living Spirit of Jesus. The One before whom we could lay all our burdens down and become free.

It is said that when the disciples experienced the Holy Spirit’s fire on Pentecost Sunday, they were so filled with joy and exuberance that people assumed they were drunk – assumed the disciples were drunk until they experienced the joy for themselves. So it is with anyone who harbors even a little love, compassion, or grace in their hearts, and anyone who yearns for more. For the fire fills them with more, burning away their burdens so they can contain more of what they yearn for.

III. A Burning Heart

You don’t need to experience the pyrotechnics of Pentecost to encounter the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Spirit’s power is experienced in the quietest of moments.

A year ago, Countrysiders Nancy and George Behringer traveled to Churchill, Manitoba to see the polar bears who gather by Hudson Bay each winter patiently waiting for ice to form so they can go fishing on the bay. One night, after the travelers had long been in bed, a guide called out in the halls, “Northern lights! Northern lights! Northern lights!” All but Nancy remained in their beds, having already seen the Northern Lights a night or two before. So Nancy unexpectedly found herself alone on the frozen tundra, looking up at the heavens to behold one of Earth’s great and fiery light-shows as if it had been created for her eyes alone. In that moment, she felt utterly small in the face of the glory before her, and a feeling peace washed over her that turned into great excitement, even bliss.

Nancy’s story gives us a hint of what people experience when they quietly encounter the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God’s love and grace made manifest in their lives – a power that Christians call the living Spirit of Jesus. When we get even a small taste of the glory and majesty of God’s love and grace, which is given for everyone and everything, it makes us aware of how small we are, yet the experience feels like all this glory and majesty is there just for us. All fear dissolves as we experience deep peace washing over us and we realize that every hair on our head is counted – and therefore known deeply – by God. We may feel as small as a sparrow, but we know that God values us more highly than many sparrows. We therefore let go of all our petty fears

and concerns and enter a state of pure and unadulterated bliss. This experience is our baptism, not of water but of Spirit.

This same feeling is what I experience over and over again on Martin Luther King weekend as I re-memorize his famous “I have a dream speech.” Like witnessing the Northern Lights, it sets my heart on fire all over again, burning away my small and petty concerns, making room for even more love and grace. King reminds me that the arc of the Universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. And I am reminded that, so long as there is a glimmer of God’s light within me, it is destined to bend with that great arc. Bend until all that is unjust within me – and all people – is burned away in the fiery baptism of God’s majestic love.

I leave you, therefore, with his speech. May it bring the fire of Gehenna to you – or the fire of the Northern Lights – inviting you to let go of all that is wasteful, and move you to take another step toward God’s peace.

IV. I Have A Dream

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day our 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 one day even the state of Mississippi – a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and freedom.

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

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor’s lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted. The mountains and the hills shall be made low. The rough places shall be made plains and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together knowing that we will be free one day. That will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring." And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain in Georgia and Lookout Mountain in Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill in Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring!

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children – white men and black men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing together in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty! We are free at last!"