

C Lectionary 20 8.18.19

Luke 12:49-56

Focus Statement: God is present and active in our world.



The choices of bulletin cover art this morning were, well, limited. It was this cartoony picture of the earth on fire barreling through space or six different options of a flaming sword. I went with the flaming earth because it reminded me of an early 2000s viral internet cartoon called “The End of the World.” In it, a guy with a weird French-Canadian accent explained how the theory of mutually assured destruction is more than likely going to end in humanity blowing ourselves up. Which sounds depressing, but somehow the fact that it’s told through low-quality animation and bad jokes made the end of the world seem light-hearted and funny.

If there is one thing that Americans agree on these days, it is that we are divided. Last week I was listening to a program about political talk radio, and it was talking about how we have become so siloed that we do not even agree on the same base set of facts any longer. One conservative radio host shared how prior to 2015, when a listener would send him a comment with factual inaccuracies, he could counter the mistakes, and commenter would respond appreciatively of the new information. Now, he says, if he counters factual inaccuracies, the commenter challenges his facts.

At the risk of entering into the fray myself, apparently the ELCA made Fox News last week for a resolution approved at the Churchwide Assembly declaring the ELCA a “sanctuary church body.” And since you may be getting questions about what this means, it felt important as your pastor to offer some clarification. First off, what does the ELCA resolution actually say? Well, humorously, it says that the ELCA declares itself a sanctuary church body, and asks the Churchwide Council to provide a written report for what that means at the 2022 Churchwide Assembly. So, I’ll get back to you in three years with a full definition... But, what it does say is it recognizes that sanctuary is more than just a physical shelter, it also means having a response to those in need, a strategy to provide assistance, a vision for how the world should be, and a moral imperative to action. The resolution reaffirms that the ELCA has had a long-term and growing commitment to migrants and refugees. A commitment that includes the Lutheran missionary work of the 1800s, the welcoming of German migrants during World War II, at one point 1 in every 6 Lutherans in the world was a migrant or refugee, we come from a heritage who knows what it means to seek refuge. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service came out of the crisis of World War Two, and is now one of nine governmentally recognized refugee resettlement organizations, and one of only two that serves unaccompanied minors. So, contrary to the Fox News panel’s assertion, the ELCA is not encouraging its churches to break US immigration law, or any law. What it does mean is that the ELCA continues its commitment to support refugees as they are resettled in the US, to provide legal assistance to immigrants pursuing their legally-protected right to seek asylum, and ensure undocumented immigrants know and understand their rights under US law. It also means that the ELCA will continue to advocate for just and humane treatment of detained immigrants, to

accompany minors through immigration court proceedings, and to speak out against xenophobia, racism, and fear-mongering. Pastor Robert Jeffries referenced Romans 13, which urges obedience to civil authorities as they are ordained by God. Obedience unless, as Pastor Jeffries pointed out, those authorities ask us to go against moral obligations. And here's where I differ with Pastor Jeffries suggestion that scripture has nothing to say about our treatment of migrants. I would argue that a text that reminds us of our ancestor Abraham giving and seeking hospitality in a foreign land, Moses leading the Israelites from slavery into freedom, and even Jesus fleeing a violent dictator and seeking asylum in Egypt, a text that, as we will read in a few weeks in Hebrews, urges us to "show hospitality to strangers" for the possibility of entertaining angels, has a lot to say about our moral obligation, to say nothing of the national and international laws guarding and protecting those who leave their own homes in search of safety and opportunity. That is what the ELCA Churchwide Assembly meant when it declared us a sanctuary church body.

I started this little screed with the phrase, "at the risk of entering into the fray myself," but honestly, entering into the fray is precisely what I intended to do. Enter myself into the fray and give you language and background to enter yourselves into it as well. Because entering into the fray is what Jesus calls us to in our Gospel reading for this morning. "I came 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!" Whoa Jesus, where did this come from?! What happened to "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among God's people"? Or "peace I leave with you, my peace I give to

you”? Or, from just a few verses before, “do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”? One of these things seems like not like the other.

So let’s talk a little bit about peace. Jeremiah and Ezekiel both spoke of the sins who led God’s people astray, “claiming, ‘peace, peace’ when there is no peace.” The peace Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke against is the “go along to get along” sort of peace, the peace that ignores persecution in the interest of harmony, that values the status quo over the risk of salvation, that sees conflict as the problem rather than a symptom of a deeper wound. The time that Jesus lived in was a time of such fabled peace. First century Jerusalem was under what was known as the Pax Romana, the so-called “peace of Rome.” The Pax Romana was peace through strength, it was do what Rome tells you because Rome’s army is bigger than yours and it will crush you if you disobey. It wasn’t mutually assured destruction, because only one side ran the risk of being destroyed, but it was peace through fear of annihilation. And I would argue, and I think Jesus is arguing, that peace held in place by terror is not peace at all, it is captivity and violence.

Peace is not the absence of division, peace is not niceness, and peace is not necessarily calm. The peace of the kingdom of God, the peace Christ is bringing, is a peace that is freeing, a peace that is redeeming, a peace that is transformational. It is the “way of peace” Mary sung about in the magnificat, a peace that brings the powerful from their thrones, that lifts up the lowly, that fills the hungry, that scatters the proud, according to the promises God made. And that peace, Jesus recognizes, is not a peace that is absent of division. Jesus knew that this peace would bring division, because he’d already lived it. We’re in chapter

twelve now, but way back in chapter four you might remember Jesus' first sermon to his hometown synagogue, where he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, that he had been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the townspeople responded by leading him to the brow of a hill that they might hurl him off the cliff. Jesus is already well aware that the message he brings is not one that will make him universally popular.

We're in chapter twelve, we're still a few chapters from the end, but since the Transfiguration, we've known where we're headed. We're headed to Jerusalem; we're headed to the cross. The fire Jesus is eager to kindle is the fire of salvation, the baptism with which he will be baptized is death and resurrection. So yes, Jesus is eager to get this fire kindled, because this is the fire of change, the fire of transformation, the fire of God's active, loving, saving, redeeming presence in the world.

And here's the really good news. Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" But we're not hearing these words from Jesus; we're reading them two-thousand years after they were spoken. Which means, the fire Jesus wanted to kindle, consider it kindled. The baptism with which he was to be baptized, it has already been completed. That fire, that baptism, that was Christ's death and resurrection. That was the event that forever set us free from the bonds of sin and death and for service to God and our neighbor.

Last Sunday I shared a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but it's so pertinent to this morning that I think it bears repeating. "There is no peace along the way to safety. For peace must be dared, it is itself the great venture and can never be safe." That is the peace that Jesus died and rose again to bring us. A peace that is not free of division, rather a peace that sets us free. So enter into the fray, dear people of God. The fire is kindled. Amen.