

*Handling Stress*

*Shepherd's Grace Church*

*August 25, 2013*

**Luke 12:49-56**

<sup>49</sup>“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup>I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup>From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup>they 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 mother-in-law.”

<sup>54</sup>He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. <sup>55</sup>And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. <sup>56</sup>You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (Also read 1Kings 22-23, 41-43)

Our God is an Awesome God! OUR GOD IS AN AWESOME GOD! OUR GOD IS AN AWESOME GOD!! We say it, we sing it but do we really ever try to comprehend it? Solomon is trying to convey it this morning in 1Kings. There is no God like you, “Keeping covenant! Showing steadfast love “ with all who will walk in your presence! Solomon wants all the earth to know the God he has come to know! Solomon’s God keeps promises. Solomon’s God protects! Solomon’s God maintains a relationship! That is the God Solomon wants the people of Israel to know!

Our God is an Awesome God! Solomon doesn’t just want the people of Israel to know. Listen to the rest of His prayer. He invites God to fulfill the requests of others, of those who have never known him, who have never heard of Him! He is Lord! He is Lord! He has risen from the dead and He is Lord! Every knee shall bend, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord! Solomon wants every knee to bend! Solomon wants every tongue to confess! Our God is an Awesome God! He is God of all!

We have no problem wishing this on Sunday morning do we? We come to this nice safe place where no one will criticize the way we worship or the prayers we lift of the songs we will sing and we proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord...That our God is an Awesome God...That the whole world should recognize Him now!

Our lives are not that different from the lives of the people living in Solomon’s day. Day after day they walked by the temple. Day after day they marveled at the magnificent structure that had been created

to honor the covenant between them and their God! Day after day they spoke to one another! Look how marvelous this place is! Look how wonderful this place is! Look at the incredible treasure King David and King Solomon used to honor the God of Israel.

We do the same things don't we? Day after day we drive by our church. Day after day we say, "what a great church we have!" Day after day we think, "How fortunate I am to attend worship in such a great place!" How fortunate am I that we have this space, this place to come to and remember our awesome God! We drive by other churches and we admire the outside of these buildings as well. We marvel at how God has blessed them and us! We stand in awe at the magnificent structures and the incredible treasure provided by people to honor our God!

Our God is an Awesome God!

The difficulty the people of Israel encountered as they walked by the temple however, was one of history! Look again at Solomon's prayer from 1Kings 8. He prayed that the people would know a God who kept their covenant. He prayed that the people would know a God who was steadfast in His promises of Love for them! He prayed further that others, the other nations of the world, would look at the magnificent temple built as an offering to the Lord and be inclined to know the One True God who could offer them salvation!

As time passed however, the purpose of the temple was forgotten. Solomon, the wisest man on earth, stupidly believed he could put himself above the Lord! He married countless women, had hundreds of others who were concubines, allowed foreign influences to effect his decision making; in short, he turned his back on God! His reign became not about his prayer for the people but about his own personal interest and his own political fortunes!

The people looked at the history of Solomon's leadership and remembered not his prayer, but his example. They walked by the temple and remembered the magnificent treasure and the incredible wealth but they did not remember the Lord! They did not remember the promise! They did not remember the prayer! They remembered instead the gluttony and debauchery; they remembered the wealth and the greed that became trademarks for Solomon's kingship. The difficulty the people encountered was history.

History always looks backward and is written by the victor, by the ruler, by those in power! The history the people were given did not focus on God and His steadfast love, but on power and wealth and greed; the things of the world and the way those things could be pursued. History always looks backward! History only remembers. The gospel for today offers an alternative!

Jesus says in the Gospel, “ I have come to bring a fire to the earth!” When we hear these words we should feel the hairs on the back of our neck stand on end! We should feel an excitement, an eagerness, an anticipation! We should be reminded that there is a history of fire in our relationship with God! In Exodus, God leads God’s people out of slavery and bondage by fire. He goes ahead of them as a pillar of fire in the night! He goes ahead of them as a cloud by day! The cloud is as important as the fire but we will come to that in a bit! For now, we should concentrate on the fire of God and God’s desire to renew his relationship with God’s chosen people!

Back in chapter 2 of Luke’s gospel, Simeon sees Jesus as Mary and Joseph bring him to temple for dedication. Simeon’s response is to embrace the presence of the child and to proclaim that “He will bring salvation to the many in fulfillment of God’s promise!” Simeon recognizes in Jesus the history of God’s relationship with God’s chosen people. The prophets have been silent for 400 years, God’s voice seems to have left the people of Israel. They have remembered only the history of greed and lust left to them by kings in the line of David and Solomon. They have fallen victim to the predatory nature of the Roman Empire that has invaded their land and enslaved their spirit! They have forgotten that theirs, ours is an Awesome God!

Simeon tries to remind them but their ears are closed even as they are closed to the voices of other prophets such as Isaiah (Isaiah 6: 1-11). As a result, they try to throw Jesus off the cliff of his own hometown and the leaders make plans to kill him. Is it any wonder that as Jesus announces his responsibility to kindle a fire on the earth he says at the same time, “How I wish it was already kindled!” Jesus wants people to remember the fire of God! He wants them to see the flame that has burned as their guide throughout their history!

He recognizes however that the people have another history that keeps getting in their way! He recognizes that they have been corrupted by the history of greed and power to which they have fallen victim! He knows that when the disciples asked him in chapter 11 to teach them to pray they cannot hear the fullness of the prayer. He knows they cannot hear “Give us this day or daily bread.” Jesus recognizes that the recent history the people have been living under has taught them an alternative lesson from the one God wants them to know!

Recent history has taught them that they must look out for themselves. Recent history has taught that they must hoard everything that comes their way and not only that, but that they must lust after all that their neighbor has as well. Daily bread is not sufficient for the people Jesus has come to. History has taught them that they must take care of themselves and that they cannot be concerned with the needs of others!

History however, only looks backwards and it only looks backward on the line from which it was written. When history gets off the intended path of God, it becomes written only by men, by men who perceive

the power of it and write it to best reflect the greed and gluttony they have come to seek. This is the history Jesus must overcome as he seeks to kindle a fire on the earth.

The fire is difficult to kindle because the people can no longer perceive their worth to God. The people have been taught by their history that they are worthless to the Romans who are their captors. They have been taught that they are pawns to the kings who were to serve them. Therefore, when Jesus tells them to pray only for their daily bread they do not hear! They long for peace and comfort and a prayer for today is simply not sufficient.

We should be able to empathize with this ancient people of Israel! As we look around our world we see the increasing disparity between people who have and those who have not! We see the ever shrinking middle class in the United States. We struggle to pay our taxes which take an ever increasing share of our income. We struggle to provide fuel for the transportation we have grown accustomed to as prices rise on a daily basis. We struggle to provide health care for ourselves and for our families as the costs escalate faster and faster! We read in corporate reports about the companies who are leading in each of these industries reporting record earnings and we wonder at the greed of those who have. We want and we are consumed by that want! It is difficult for us to hear that we have enough, that all we need is our daily bread!

We wonder with the people of Israel where the fire is that will lead us out of bondage. We feel worthless and confused. Where is God? How will God deliver us! We simply cannot hear the words we pray and we cannot comprehend our worth. For this reason, just ahead of our lesson for today, in chapter 12 Jesus tells the people about their worth to God. He reminds them, and us of how magnificent we are! He tells us of the lilies of the field and how magnificently clothed they are by God. He reminds us that these flowers have no worries, that God provides all they need. He also tells of the sparrows who do not plant yet always have plenty to eat. He reminds us that we are worth more than several sparrows! (I do not know how many sparrows we are worth but I think you will understand the point!) We are important to God and God is going to provide for us!

God, in Jesus has come to bring a fire! God has come to once again lead God's people out of bondage and into freedom! God has come near! His name is Emanuel! God with us! He has come to light our way out of the darkness and into the light of God's incredible love! He has come to let us know that God has always and will always continue to provide all we need. He has come to remind God's chosen people that the 400 years of silence are come to an end; that the time is now; that there is change ahead!

Jesus has a baptism with which to be baptized. A baptism is an immersion. It is a total changing. Jesus has become human in order to demonstrate our humanity to us. This willing acquiescence allows Jesus to experience the totality of our lives and our struggles in order that He may demonstrate another way

of dealing with the day to day struggles we face. He offers not a long term solution to our struggles but instead; he offers our daily bread! His offer causes great stress in his existence as human. He knows God will always provide all we need but he also knows that people are working from an alternative history, from a path down which they should never have traveled. He recognizes that this contrast will bring not peace, but division. What stress he is under to communicate the alternative.

Jesus knows that history always looks backward. He knows that division will always exist until people can see the world in a different way. History looks backward but a sermon looks forward. Jesus knows that God does not work from our past but from our future. He does not work from our distant future but from a future that is near as our next heart beat, that is close as our next breath. Jesus knows that God is preparing for and anticipating all our needs from such a closeness that we could reach out to Him if only we would. Jesus also knows that we cannot comprehend this closeness because we are looking too far away! We are looking for worldly security. We are looking for a 401k that will assure our possessions and our continued lifestyle, but Jesus knows our lifestyle brings division.

Father struggles against son in our world because they disagree about what they can have and how they can have it. Father wants to protect the security he has worked for in his old age and son wants to acquire even more so that his future can be assured. Both fail to recognize that neither is working for the "Kingdom, the Power, the Glory of God!" What stress this places them and us under. How mightily we struggle to build the bigger barns that will hold all our treasure when God then calls us and says, "You fool! This very night your life will be required of you!" We remain divided and we cannot even express our division. We want to be politically correct to the point we are willing to allow others to define our lives.

A couple of weeks ago I went to a birthday party in Salina. The party was for a three year old and the theme was a K-State birthday. Everyone was supposed to wear purple to the party to "honor" the birthday boy. *I am sure that the young child was a huge K-State fan and that he would have been devastated if people offended him by not wearing purple.* None-the-less, there are more sensible people in our family, those who have a greater appreciation for what is right than what is politically correct. These people (Proudly I include myself in this group) chose not to bow to the political correctness of the day! Instead of wearing the obligatory purple we proudly wore our crimson and blue! We recognized that this could potentially cause conflict but we believed strongly enough to risk the struggle in order to remain true to our beliefs.

The result at the party was that everyone got along just fine. We not only peacefully co-existed, but we actually laughed and talked with those who wore purple! The point here is not so much that KU and K-State can get along together and put aside their rivalries for the sake of something greater; though I do think there is a valid point to be made there. The point is in fact that we spend far too much time

worrying about how our differences are going to offend others instead of recognizing that our differences are the very thing that creates our strength as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus did not come to bring peace among us so that we could all hold hands and pretend that we were the same! He came to bring division so that we could recognize that our differences could offer new ideas and new understandings of the relationship we have with one another and with God! Our differences exist not to keep us apart but to help us work together! Paul says in 1Corinthians that we are not all feet, we are not all eyes but we are all parts of the one body in Jesus Christ who is our head. Our differences are a necessity if we are to allow God to provide for our daily bread.

For too long we have tried to be the same, mistakenly thinking that sameness was what created equality. We have thought that we had to find the Lord in exactly the same way, that we had to have a salvation experience in exactly the same way, that we had to be baptized in exactly the same way or we could not be authentic to our Christian experience. Jesus came to bring a fire to the earth. That fire is intended to light our path and keep us from stumbling in the dark. It is not intended to make sure that we all wear exactly the same shoes while we walk on that path or that we all experience the path in the same way! Some of us stumble as we walk. Others reach out to catch us. Some of us trip over a rock we do not see. Others reach out to break our fall. Even though we are on the same path, our life experiences are very different and our experiences bring with them an ability to understand parts of God's Kingdom from very different perspectives. These perspectives offer alternatives that allow for others to recognize God's grace and love as we all share together!

Just this last week I was in the hospital. I came home from our mission trip to Albuquerque and was tired. I did not feel well and thought I could just struggle through my feelings. On Monday, I walked from my car in the parking lot at South Central Kansas Medical Center to the front door to visit one of our congregants in the hospital. By the time I reached the front door, I was so out of breath I had to stop and rest. Knowing that that is not like me, I decided to call the doctor and make an appointment for her to check me out!

Most of you who know me know that making the call is not like me either. I tend to wait and wait to call a doctor. I always think I can work through any illness and I did think the same thing here. I assumed I had caught something in Albuquerque and that I would be able to fight it off, but when I was so short of breath I decided to call. The doctor made an appointment for me on Thursday.

When I went in, I told the doctor what I had been experiencing. When I finally mentioned the pain in my leg, the surgery I had in June, and the trip to New Mexico, she almost immediately made the connection. She examined my leg and confirmed that a blood clot had broken loose. She then sent me for a sonogram and some blood work.

As I walked down to the lab for the tests the doctor ordered I was convinced that my situation was really no big deal. Never the less, I did as I was told. While I walked out of the doctor's office I remember looking around. I saw mothers with little children, I saw elderly people, I saw the lady I met as I entered the office. She was an elderly lady who was one of my friend's mom. I knew from our conversation before I entered the office that she was very ill.

As I walked past all these people I was aware of my position of privilege in this world. Because of your generosity in caring for me and my family as your pastor, I was able to proceed with confidence to the tests which had been ordered. I remember thinking as I walked past the other people, wondering how many of them could approach the same tests with my confidence. I had insurance. I knew that I could afford the tests because I had insurance.

I remember thinking at the time; I wonder how many of these people do not have insurance. I wonder how many here in this office can move through this situation with the same confidence I have. I wonder how many of these people have the ability to pay for what ever is told to them today. I wonder how many have adequate insurance. I walked on down the hall and to the examination room for my tests.

As I entered the waiting room for my tests there were more people. I waited and filled out the necessary paperwork for my insurance. I looked around. Once again, I realized how calm I was in my situation. I knew I could afford the care I was receiving and even though I was aware of how expensive the treatment was, I knew I could afford it. I was keenly aware of my position of privilege. I thought, even if everyone in this room can afford the same care I receive, how many others cannot.

In our country there are over 34 million people who do not have adequate health care insurance today. Why should I have a privilege over any of them. Why should I receive care and someone else, perhaps someone sicker than me, perhaps someone with a more immediate need than me!

When I came out of the test, my doctor was waiting for me. She had a very concerned look on her face. She escorted me immediately to the hospital where I was checked in and rushed to a room. Seeing the look on the face of the doctor, I became more concerned about my own condition, but still I wondered how many people who needed the care I received did not receive it or could not. I wondered how many in our own congregation and I wondered how long it would be before we as a nation, as a people concerned with one another would finally understand that we are all important. As Jesus said, we are worth many sparrows!

We cannot fix the social injustice that exists in our society today. We should do all we can to raise awareness in our world and we should continue to act out of love for our fellow people but we cannot fix the injustice as a people of Christ. While we cannot fix the issues of injustice, we can fix the spiritual injustice in our world. We can treat one another with love and with respect. We can recognize our

differences and rise to the point where we understand our differences as strengths rather than liabilities!

When clouds gather we can look at them and know rain is coming! When winds blow we can recognize the heat they bring. Brothers and sisters, the clouds are gathering. The cloud of God's presence is upon us. It is bringing a word more powerful than any we have ever experienced. This word is warning us of the heat we face unless we learn to live together and to love together as we utilize our differences for God's Kingdom and for God's Power and for God's Glory!

The division Jesus speaks of is a division between what the world sees blowing in the wind and what we see as Christians. Will we work toward fanning the flame of righteousness in our world or will we continue to turn a deaf ear to that which we hear and a blind eye to that which we see! Jesus came to bring fire to the world. He is breathing a word to fan the flame! Will we be led by the light or will we continue to walk in the darkness. Will we handle the stress of our world's history of greed and debauchery by bowing to the world or by believing in the One who has overcome the world?

Our history indicates we are more inclined to bow to peer pressure. Our future allows for a different possibility; a sermon spoken by the one who comes to offer a different forecast; a prayer offered by one who wants more for us than we can even want for ourselves! Look around! See the signs of the present day! Know your daily bread is at hand! Amen!