

August 18, 2019

It is Going to Rain!

Shepherd's Grace Church

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

⁵⁴He 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. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (Luke 12: 49-56)

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry! (Isaiah 5: 1-7)

This morning, we welcome two permanent guests to our congregation. Albert, a foreign exchange student from the Czech Republic and Francesco, a student from Italy. Albert arrived just last evening after a rather eventful trip. His flight from Prague was cancelled on Friday and he had to delay his departure one day. After departing on time on Saturday, his flight in Philadelphia was delayed and delayed and delayed again until it became obvious he was going to miss his connection in Dallas. Albert stepped off the plane to ask a flight attendant what he should do and just as he did, the door to the plane was closed and he was left behind.

American Airlines rerouted his flight to Chicago where he was again delayed. At last, he arrived in Wichita, one day late and after 28 hours of travel at approximately 11: 45 PM. To his credit, he woke up this morning to join us for worship. (This story is not intended to embarrass anyone who did not make it to church on Sunday because you were up too late on Saturday night. Unless of course, you might feel that now your excuse is a little less flimsy than you thought it was.) We are glad Albert will be with us for the balance

of the school year and look forward to learning much from him as we get to know him better.

Francesco had a less eventful travel plan. His flight from Rome was delayed 2 hours prior to departure but he was able to make his connection in Atlanta and arrived on time in Wichita at about 10:45 Thursday evening.

On Friday, he and I went to Augusta High School to begin his enrollment process. As we were reviewing his transcript with the guidance counselor, I discovered that one of the electives he had taken was a class in wine tasting. The counselor and I agreed this would be a fine addition to the curriculum at Augusta. Everyone should have a better understanding of wine tasting. At any rate, we do welcome Francesco and look forward to getting to know him and learn from him this year as he shares some of his culture with us.

Perhaps, it would have been helpful to know a little more about wine before the lesson Isaiah gives us today. You can recall from the story that a vineyard was built. It was built very carefully. Protection was placed around it so animals or other, unwanted people could attack it. A tower was placed at the center of it to keep watch against unwanted intruders. Great care was taken with the plantings. Each one was tended to and given the most appropriate care. The vineyard should have produced the finest fruits and the best tasting wine. Instead, the vineyard produced sour grapes, grapes unfit for consumption.

Of course, we learn at the end of the reading that the vineyard is a metaphor. It is in fact, the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. God, Himself, is the caretaker of this vineyard. It is He who has prepared the place of planting. It is God's own promised land.

While the land is the Nation of Israel, the people are the branches and vines in the vineyard. God has tended them carefully! God had tended his vineyard and the vines very carefully. He had fed them and nurtured them. He had let them through the wilderness and provided manna in the desert and water from the rock. He had given them commandments, the law by which to live and work and love with one another. God had done all God could do to insure that the people God was raising up were people who would be the best.

God wanted them to be the best in character, the best in leadership, the best in care for others. God simply wanted them to be the best at being like God. After all, as we have been taught, they were created in God's own image and in God's own likeness. They were to have the character, leadership and care of God. In short, they were to love one another.

In the course of their adventure in the wilderness, they learned that man does not live by bread alone. Even though they had manna and water, they had to learn that they had more than that. They had to know that their very life depended on the teachings of God...the word of God.

It was really the word that God wanted them to know. Because you are reading this I can say it this way...it was the Word of God that God wanted them to know. Man does not live by bread alone but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God! John 1: 1-3 reminds us that in the beginning, there was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All that came into being came into being by the Word...The Word that was given to God's people in the form of the law and all the commandments!

It was this Word, given by God that tended to the vineyard. In the desert, the Word went before them as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This word was the light that was to nurture and encourage God's people.

John 1: 6-7 says it this way, "The Light was coming into the world and the darkness could not overcome it. The reality is that this light had come into the world at creation when God spoke. God's first word was "Light" and the Light was good and God separated it from darkness. This Light came into the world in the beginning and brought all things into the world including the people of God.

God tended to these people, providing for them not only the food and water they needed but providing for them the very best food and water, as John puts it in his Gospel, the Bread of Life and the Living Water!

For this reason, it was God's great disappointment when he harvested that which he had so generously and zealously cared for. God expected the fruit of the vine he had grown to produce an example for all humankind. God expected sweet grapes that others would desire and pursue. God expected good tasting grapes that others would desire to enjoy!

Instead, God received sour grapes. Grapes that were of no interest to others. Not only were these grapes of no interest, they were so off-putting that others turned completely away from them.

Sour grapes were so bitter and undesirable that people not only avoided them but they did all they could to crush them out of existence.

All the Light, all the Words of care, all the Living water could not cause the world to receive these sour grapes.

It is into this world of sour grapes that the Gospel of Luke comes today. As we come to the end of Chapter 12, we find Jesus, the same Jesus that has warned of the sour grapes of the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites and admonishing of their error in interpreting God's will for God's people.

Now, Jesus shifts his focus to the crowds, to us! We are, after all the same sour grapes grown in the vineyard so carefully tended by God. We, by our willingness to associate with the Word, the Vine, the Water, the Bread, the very giver of life, are and have continued to become the fruit of God's vineyard.

"I have come to bring fire," Jesus says. As we hear this, we should at once harken back to the words of Genesis. "Let there be Light!" As these words illuminate our minds, we can remember the Light that has come into the world. We can acknowledge that this

Light is the Light that shines on all people and on all creation, causing growth and producing the possibility for a future.

The Fire Jesus comes to bring is that which is intended to spark a new existence in the world. When He says, "How I wish it were already kindled," we should recognize that it should have been kindled generations before his human coming. We should recognize that it is the fire, the light God intended for the nations when God chose his people even with Abram.

The fire should be kindled, the conversation should be unnecessary but necessary it is because there is no fire...there is no passion...there is no purpose in God's chosen people.

Instead of using the light God has given them...the Light God has given us, we have allowed the light to be extinguished. I should say at this point, very nearly extinguished! Just as God's chosen people through the years, we have failed to see the Light.

The Hebrew people Jesus was speaking with two thousand years ago are the same people he is speaking with today...us. He is saying that there is a fire coming into the world and that we are to be changed by it. He is saying that there is a Word coming into the world, a Word that we can live by and we are to be changed by it. He is saying that there is a Living Water coming into the world.

Jesus wishes this fire was already kindled because it should already be kindled. It should be the Light we walk by, the Water we are washed by, the Word we live by and we ought to be changed by it. Instead, stands in front of us and reminds us that we have not lived our lives according to the witness God has brought into the world. We have not helped the widowed, the orphaned, the poor, the downtrodden, the resident alien who is coming to our land!

We have thrown the water of the world onto the Fire God brought into the world by serving our own self-interest. We have sought after the wealth of the world instead of sharing the abundance God has provided. We have quenched the passion of others for helping and healing. We have stomped on the embers of warmth leaving behind the cold ashes of bitterness and hatred. We have all sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God!

The Fire was sent and it was as a light shining in the darkness but we did not notice. Jesus now comes to re-kindle the fire. He comes, he says, with a baptism with which he is to be baptized.

We hear his message this morning and we begin to look past the first verse to this second one. A Baptism...what a wonderful time. Baptism is a celebration...for us! It is a time we celebrate the welcoming of a new baby or a person newly confirmed into the church. It is a time for family and friends to share the special commitment the young person has made...a commitment to follow Jesus!

Just the thought of Baptism leaves us feeling all warm and cuddly inside. It reminds of that we were once trapped in death but because of the submission we made to God, we are given new life. We die to our old self and we are raised to a new self, a new life!

But that is our Baptism...That is not Jesus' Baptism. He says His Baptism is placing him under a great stress.

How can Jesus be under stress? He is, after all, God who has become human. While Jesus knows this, he knows the part of it we often forget. It is his human part that is to be Baptized with this Baptism. His humanness is the part that will die to his old self. His human part does not know about the plan for new life. That part is not revealed until the human part has died!

The stress Jesus feels is the incredible loneliness of facing this death to sin all alone. We face it with family and friends...Jesus walks the lonesome valley of death by himself. What an incredible pressure he must feel as he wrestles with the reality that he alone must die for the sins of the world. He knows all of this as a human...as one of us, and he feels all the pressure you or I would feel as he lives into this Baptism.

As Jesus preaches to us this morning, he preaches as a human, not as God. As a human, he reminds us of the pressure we all feel, the pressure to live a life of service and hope. He reminds us that our lives are a constant struggle to do the right thing. Our lives are a series of choices we are faced with and in each choice is the option to serve or be selfish.

Jesus reminds us this morning that He too has a choice and He has chosen this baptism because it is God's will and not his own. He has chosen it because of His desire to serve and share with those whom He cares about.

This is not a choice of peace. This is not a choice of Shalom, where nothing is missing and nothing is broken. It is a choice of division. It is a choice that forces all of us to make a choice. It is a choice that reaches down into the very fabric of our lives. It touches our families and forces us to struggle with questions as complex as life and death.

How will we serve God? Will we take up our cross and follow him? Will we hang back and wait to see if the path gets any easier? Will we glorify God in our lives or will we glorify ourselves by praising the pundits of popular public opinion?

We know that we are often swayed by the strongest voices in our society. We know that sometimes we do go along to get along. We know that people do kill people. We know that sometimes they kill them with guns and yet we choose to stay silent. We know that sometimes people speak of other people as less than...less than in color, less than in economic success, less than in sexual preference. We do not know how other people have lived their lives or the choices they have had to make but we judge their choices and often by criteria that are only of the flesh.

We divide over these choices. We divide at the most basic levels. We divide regardless of the stupidity of the division.

When I was 7 years old, I asked my parents to take me to church. My dad readily agreed. As a result, I started attending church regularly and continued through my entire life. When I was a high schooler, I joined youth group which met on Sunday evenings. I could walk to youth group as church was only about 2 blocks from my house.

Every Sunday as I left the house I would wear shorts and sandals with no socks. My dad took exception to this. "You do not go to church with out socks," he insisted! I argued that it did not matter what I wear to church, what mattered was that I went. He sent me back up to my room every week to get socks.

Dad did not know that as soon as I left the house, I went and hid my socks behind his rose bushes until I returned home. Dad and I never did reach agreement on this issue. We were divided all my life...and I pushed the issue every week!

I know it made him furious but I did not care at the time. Today, the division seems frivolous but it serves to remind us that often times we become so entrenched in our own positions we forget how easy it would be to compromise and focus on the bigger issues.

Jesus wants us to focus on the bigger issues! He wants us to set aside the color of the church carpet and the decisions to serve green beans at the steak fry. He wants us to argue and struggle with what it means to be in a relationship with him! He want us to remember what it means and struggle with how we help the homeless. He wants us to struggle with what it means to share the good news with others and to argue about how we can best greet guests coming into our congregation.

We are supposed to be divided on these things so we can be in agreement on the greater issues. We can agree that there was a light that has come into the world. We can agree that the Light is the Light of God and darkness cannot overcome it! We can agree that God created the heavens and the earth and that this creation comes about through the power of God's Holy Spirit and through the Word who became flesh, Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah!

These are the things that are to bring us together and there will be no division on them! We are supposed to know this by the last part of the passage I shared today. We are supposed to recognize that we do know things about the earth. We know the weather because smart people have gone to school and studied and shared with us how to tell what the weather is going to do.

We can also know about the events of our times in the same way. How? By knowing the very same thing about these things. God has given us a book and invites us to study it and gain knowledge and deepen our understanding of God's desire to offer us salvation.

How again? One example is in the book of Exodus where God gives us the rehearsal for Christ's coming. Do you know what the 10th of Nissan is? You do! You just do not know that you do. In the book of Exodus, God commands His chosen people to prepare for the Passover by sending all of the fathers out to select a lamb from their flock. It is to

be a yearling without blemish. The fathers are to bring the lamb into the home where it is to live with the family for a week. It is to eat with the family, sleep with the children, and cause the family to fall in love with it. Then on the 15th of Nissan, the father is to take the lamb to the priest for slaughter as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin.

Now do you know the 10th of Nissan? Of course, you know it as Palm Sunday, the day that the Lamb of God was selected to enter into the home of God, the temple at Jerusalem and cause the people to fall in love with him only to be sacrificed...and I am sure you have done the math by now. If the 10th is Palm Sunday, the 15th is Good Friday, the day that Jesus' baptism was accomplished as he was sacrificed for our sins.

We know how to predict the weather. We also know how to learn about the events of the present age. Will we do it? Will we commit to it? Jesus, the fully Jesus did even if he did not know the outcome of his commitment. He walked by faith!

We do know the outcome. His death led to resurrection for him. Just as we are raised up in our baptism to new life, so Jesus was raised up to new life for him and in that new life, he gave us eternity, opening heaven to us so that we might once again stand in God's presence and rejoice.

It is going to rain! We know it! We also know we can have eternal life through Jesus Christ. We are the smart ones! Maybe we should share the good news! Amen!