

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Luke 12:13-21

"The Holy Fire of God"

MORE THAN A METAPHOR

I want to talk to you today about the "Holy Fire of God." What is the Holy Fire of God? Two of our Scripture lessons today shed light on the subject so I want to look at them in some detail, especially our gospel lesson from Luke 12. In the Scriptures, fire is a metaphor for understanding the Lord, but it is more than just a metaphor, for God actually uses fire to reveal His very nature.

Do you remember how the Lord first appeared to Moses? In a burning bush – specifically a fire that burned bright but did not burn up the bush! Do you remember how God led the people of Israel through their wilderness wanderings at night? Through a pillar of fire. Do you remember what happened when the prophet Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal and their faith in their false god? He challenged them to call down fire on the pieces of sacrificed oxen; and after they failed in their incantations and cries to their deity, Elijah dug trenches around his altar and poured water on the oxen and wood of the altar until they were filled with water when he called on the Lord to rain down fire, the fire came and it burned everything up including the water!

In fact, **Hebrews 12:29** declares, "***Our God is a consuming fire.***" Now I want you to think about fire in nature. It is one of the most powerful forces on earth; and when it rages on, it becomes virtually unstoppable until it has nothing left to burn or no oxygen. What is always present with fire? Three things – the flame, heat, and light. It is why fire is probably one of the best metaphors for understanding the Trinity – that God is One Being but also Three Persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are the same but different. You can't have one without the other, but they are wholly different, not just in role or name but in person! It is tough to understand with our limited minds but the reality of fire sheds some light literally on this important truth.

WHY FIRE?

I also want you to think about what is the most powerful force in our solar system. It is the sun, right? All our planets orbit around the sun. The sun is what enables life on our planet. It is good for us when we are in perfect position to it. If our planet was too close, we would burn to death. If we were too far, we would freeze to death. If the sun all of a sudden went out on us, all life on earth would cease and we would be in total darkness. Even at night, we can see the moon because of the sun. For this reason, most in the ancient world were prone to worshipping the sun by identifying it as one of the main gods of their religion. The sun god was often seen as the most powerful in the pantheon of deities.

As Christians, like Jews, we know that the sun is not a god or God but is simply an awesome creation of the One True God. And yet, God designed the sun and placed it in the center of our solar system for a reason – to teach us about His nature and our relationship to God, Himself. The sun is simply a giant ball of fire, and so we are brought back to the nature of fire itself. Fire points us to God and when

the Bible speaks of the fire of God it's speaking of specific aspects of God's nature and how we are to approach the Lord. These aspects all come from the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit.

Recall that while no one has seen the Father, the Son, Jesus has made the Father known to us. Jesus also promised us that another comforter would come after His death and resurrection. He was making reference to the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. Do you remember how Jesus said the Holy Spirit was to come on the disciples? He said in Acts 1:8 that "***You shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.***" And what happened when the Holy Spirit came upon them? Tongues of fire appeared. It is why on Pentecost Sunday we use the color red. Also, for Holy Confirmation, we use red because fire represents the Holy Spirit of God

Like fire it is the Spirit that sheds light on God's Word and world and, therefore, understanding. Jesus said of the Spirit, "***He will take from Me and disclose it to you.***" He also said that the Spirit ***will lead us into all truth.*** The Spirit, as noted above, will also give us power. Fire is ultimately energy moving at a high rate of speed. It is heat energy, and heat can be a good thing – it can warm us. Without heat there is cold and no life. When we feel the presence of God, we are feeling the heat of the Spirit.

There is something else though that the fire does and that is it purifies. It burns off the impurities in precious metals. To get pure gold or silver, it needs to be heated up and melted to get rid of the imperfections; so too with us in terms of our sin nature. Only the Spirit can clean us up from the inside out. The basis for the Spirit to be able to do this is the blood of Christ, Christ's death on the cross. God is first and foremost holy. Holy means to be set apart and that God is totally above His creation, but it also means that God is perfect in righteousness; there is no sin or evil in Him. He cannot tolerate sin. It will be burned up before him; and if one is full of sin, they will burn up as well.

It is why the Bible talks about the refiner's fire and Paul talks about coming before the Lord and being subject to His fire that will burn away all that is chaff or worthless. It is why the Bible talks about how everything in the present world will one day be literally burned up. "*It is all going to burn*" is a popular saying when it comes to the things of this world. It is why Paul writes in **2 Cor. 4:18** that we don't look to the things that are seen, for they are temporary and are passing away, but we look to the things that are unseen, for the things that are unseen are the things that are eternal and can't be burned up!

So let's review what is true about the Holy Fire of God. It ultimately represents His nature and it is tangibly experienced through His Spirit, the Holy Spirit. We experience *His presence* – that which we can know and feel about God, *His power* to do His work and to be purified from our sin, and *His passion* to seek after the things of God.

The Spirit's fire is so important it is why the Lord spoke through Zechariah and declared, "***not by power nor by might, but by My Spirit says the Lord!***" In other words, not by our strength or power but only by God's strength and power, and that comes only from His Spirit. With this background we can not understand our two passages that talk about fire. Let's look at them again. First, **Jeremiah 23:23-32**: "***Am I a God who is near,*** declares the LORD, "***And not a God far off? 24***" "***Can a man hide himself in hiding places So I do not see him?***" declares the LORD. "***Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?***" declares the LORD.

25*"I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in My name, saying, 'I had a dream, I had a dream!'* **26***"How long? Is there anything in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy falsehood, even these prophets of the deception of their own heart, 27who intend to make My people forget My name by their dreams which they relate to one another, just as their fathers forgot My name because of Baal? 28*"*The prophet who has a dream may relate his dream, but let him who has My word speak My word in truth. What does straw have in common with grain?" declares the LORD. 29*"*Is not My word like fire?" declares the LORD, "and like a hammer which shatters a rock? 30*"*Therefore behold, I am against the prophets," declares the LORD, "who steal My words from each other. 31*"*Behold, I am against the prophets," declares the LORD, "who use their tongues and declare, 'The Lord declares.'* **32***"Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams," declares the LORD, "and related them and led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit," declares the LORD.*

The point of God's Word from Jeremiah is very clear. God's Word is truth and it will not be stopped (return void). When people (in this case so called prophets (i.e., religious leaders) get ideas or dreams – their own vision) and they do not conform or emanate from God's Word, they are not only false but they will fail. There will be consequences. God's judgment will fall - hence, the comparison of God's word to fire or a hammer that shatters a rock. So the fire here represents the judgment of God. Paul puts it this way in **Galatians 6:7**, ***"Do not be deceived whatever a man sows that is what he shall reap."*** In other words, if a farmer sows bad seed he will reap a bad crop. Likewise if we sow bad ideas, not only will it result in bad behavior it will result in severe consequences and ultimately the judgment of God. This is true for individuals, families, business, organizations and certainly churches. When we were contemplating leaving the Episcopal Church the big push in our diocese and in many others was the "Dream of God." The vision was to live into this supposed "Dream of God." The problem was that the Dream of God was really the dream of man. The Dream of God is not going to contradict or circumvent the Word of God. That is the point of this passage. Otherwise, you will be playing with fire – the fire of God!

Now let's look at **Luke 12:49-59**: Jesus said, ***"I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! 50****"But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished! 51*"*Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; 52for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. 53*"*They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."* **54***And He was also saying to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'A shower is coming,' and so it turns out. 55*"*And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, 'It will be a hot day,' and it turns out that way. 56*"*You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?57*"*And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right? 58*"*For while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him, so that he may not drag you before the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. 59*"*I say to you, you will not get out of there until you have paid the very last cent."*

Here Jesus uses the imagery of fire. But again it is more than just an image. The fire here is first the fire of judgment but it also could refer to the fire of the coming of the Holy Spirit. For John the Baptist declared earlier in Luke that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire. So Jesus is anxious to see the work of the Holy Spirit on earth. For it will be the Spirit that will accomplish the work of God in us. But this can't happen until Jesus dies on the cross. Hence, the words, "I have a baptism to undergo." Baptism is a reference to the water of judgment. Baptism means to be enveloped by water. Water again represents the Spirit of God and we all die – We suffer judgment. It is the one debt all men have to pay, but the good news is that we don't have to suffer eternal death. We can have eternal life but this only comes through the Son.

As a result, there will be division on the earth between those who receive Christ and those who don't. Some may think this is a contradiction. Didn't Jesus come to bring peace on the earth? Didn't Jesus say, "Blessed are the peacemakers?" He did, but He was talking of the peace we can have with God, the peace internally. Jesus said in **Jn. 14:27**, "***My peace I leave with you, My own peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you.***" The world's peace is fleeting; it is a façade. It is only when all is going according to the wants of those involved. But as soon as there are tough times or sacrifice needed, that peace vanishes. Jesus gives us peace with God and peace with others who are at peace with God, but there will be those who oppose the truth and work of God's Kingdom no matter how much we show Christ's love.

And so some families will be split over Christ. There will be family and friends who may reject us because of our faith. Certainly, there are some religions and cults that totally disown a person if they walk away and follow the Lord. It also reflects the truth that Jesus Himself will be rejected by the majority of those in Judea and Jerusalem and even later in the Roman Empire. It is why Jesus said, whoever wants to be His disciple must be willing to take up his cross.

Jesus then tells the people that they are good at knowing the signs that tell you how the weather is going to be, but they are blind to the spiritual signs that reflect the truth of God by Jesus. Let me say nothing has changed. Man's heart is the same today as it was thousands of years ago. Same problems, same issues, and same solution! Only God in Christ can pave the way for us to be cleansed by His Spirit and forgo judgment. He then uses the example of settling your debt with the magistrate (tax official) before having to be brought by the judge. If you were brought by the judge and thrown into debtor's prison, there would be no way out unless you paid the debt to the last cent.

The application is clear. Right now we are in the age of grace. Jesus has paid our debt. We need to settle our accounts with the Lord and let him pay our debt or we can pay it ourselves. If we pay for it ourselves rather than being cleansed by the Holy Fire of God, we will be subject to the judgment of God – a fire that cannot be quenched. In the day of political correctness this is not a popular message, but it is the Lord's message nonetheless and is why we need to make the most of our time here – pointing people to Jesus through what we say and how we live our lives! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!