

**How to Set Fire to a Hallmark Card with the Baptism of Jesus [Rev. Scott Kinder-Pyle]**  
**Luke 12:49—56**

I wonder. I wonder about a lot of things. But in church gatherings like this one today, I wonder about what Jesus means. I wonder what he means with words like “fire” and “baptism”—but especially what he means by “peace.” We heard it in verse 51; in the form of a question:

***“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?”*** And before we can answer, “Yes, of course. Of course, you’ve come to bring peace, Jesus says, ***“No, I tell you, but rather division.”*** And so, although you don’t know me very well yet, I’m inviting you to come alongside this passage with me and wonder. We have to wonder. We have to wonder about this seemingly out-of-character set of words, just like we have to wonder about all the other words that bombard us day in and day out.

For example, do you realize that in April of 2007, the United States Postal Service introduced the *Forever Stamp*, which, ironically, won’t last forever. But we should wonder about that. Just like we may wonder about the years of the *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace, which supposedly lasted between 27 BC and 180 AD—a good two-hundred years. And, according to historians, what’s ironic about the ‘Roman Peace’ was that, unless you lived in a villa on the coast, unless you traveled by chariot on the Appian Way, unless you could afford taking in the Gladiatorial bouts at the Coliseum, things for the rest of the population weren’t so peaceful. Similarly, in 1948, George Orwell wrote and published the novel, *1984*, in which the Ministry of Truth would promote the following slogans: *War is Peace...Freedom is Slavery... Ignorance is Strength*—all of which should make us wonder. What do these words mean, and can they be trusted?

Now I'm mentioning all these sketchy euphemisms to let you know, from the very start of my Interim Ministry with Northwood, that I remain extremely curious about the words we use or don't use. And I also know that sometimes, as the words of the Bible get lumped in with all the other misleading and fraudulent slogans, it's hard to tell the difference. That is to say, if Jesus is telling his followers that he's *NOT* come to bring peace, I *DO* have to wonder about the angelic message in Luke 2:14: ***"Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth PEACE..."*** What's going on? Why, in the span of ten chapters, have we gone from *Peace to those whom God favors* to *No Peace* and *Division*. And what about the repeated greetings of the Apostle Paul, when he says, ***"Grace to you and Peace..."*** He says it in his letter to the church in Philippi, where we can also find in this little ditty in Philippians 4:7: ***"And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*** All this wondering about words can get pretty exhausting—which is why places like Northwood Presbyterian are important so that we can slow down and come alongside one another in wondering.

By contrast, I could send a Hallmark card. I could have bought one of those Forever Stamps (which really aren't forever), and I could have mailed you a Hallmark card that quoted one of the verses I just mentioned, and you may have felt a gentle inkling of 'Peacefulness,' and my assumption would have been that you'd receive such a Hallmark card as a nice gesture, a nice thought; and maybe you'd say, *'Isn't the new interim pastor at Northwood nice? Isn't he sweet?'* And, while the executives with the Hallmark corporation might be sleeping a little more peacefully themselves, no where in that nice, transactional scenario would we find ourselves wondering... about what Jesus means. Right?

***“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’ve come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two, and two against three...”***

Now, to be clear, no one should be under the impression that Jesus is prescribing violence as a solution to anything. No one should presume that Jesus is here granting us the license to intentionally and gratuitously look for trouble. The remarks of Luke 12 are not *prescriptive* so much as *descriptive*. Jesus is describing. ***From now on***, when you and I practice radical hospitality and radical empathy and radical love for the other, somebody’s going to get upset. And they’re going to get upset because the old alliances of blood and soil are being broken down, because the good ol’ boys network is not going to last, and because the cocoonish affinities we enjoy by hanging out exclusively with our own tribe, with our own socio-economic class, our own ethnicity, our own race, will be purged.

I was once the co-pastor of a mostly white church in the suburbs of Philadelphia, when the only black couple we had in our midst invited me to preach at her sister’s mostly African-American church in the inner city; and it was rough. Anyway, I preached my sermon and sat down; and for the rest of the service I didn’t have a thing to do. But then, at the very end, before the last hymn, the host minister leaned over and whispered something in my ear. He said, “I want you to open the doors of the church.” I thought for second and nodded. Of course I could do that. And so, in lieu of a benediction, I literally walked down the aisle and opened the literal doors to the literal church building. And with the rain blowing in my face from the storm outside, and the sirens of ambulances screaming around the block, I turned and looked back at all the incredulous faces.

The host pastor then grinned with this sardonic grin and said, “I didn’t mean those doors.” And later, you see, he interpreted for me the customary way he had of inviting people to sincere faith, to a change of life and to the renewal of loving relationships; it was *like* opening the doors of the church. And although I felt really stupid in the moment, I’m glad it happened—because it taught me the importance of CONTEXT. What’s the context?

What’s the context of Jesus saying, “***Do you think I’ve come to bring peace?***” if not the face-to-face struggles he has on the way to death on the cross... What’s the context if not, all along that way his followers kept telling him, ‘Calm down. The Messiah doesn’t suffer.’ Moreover, the fact that Jesus was crucified at the height of Pax Romana should tell us something about how we should wonder—about *Peace*. Jesus is not bringing the kind of Peace that comes with a mere Hallmark card. Nor is he showing off the kind of Peace that comes (or never comes) with a press conference in Alaska. Jesus isn’t hankering for the kind of Peace that comes with a Nobel Peace Prize. Rather he comes within the context of real relationships, where things go wrong, where there’s trauma, where there’s grief and where the doors of the church aren’t always open.

On vacation a few weeks ago, my spouse and my adult children stood on the dock of *McKinley’s Marina* on the Alsea Bay in Oregon; and we were about to go crabbing in this little motor boat. I was nervous because, during previous years, we had gotten stuck on a sand bar. So as this old-time employee, named Merlin, gave us instructions, we each gave him our attention. He distributed life jackets—check! He provided us with raw chicken for bait—check!. He told us how to set the traps—check!

But then, as Merlin gestured to the running outboard motor, there was this little red wire, and he said, *if you pull this out too far the engine will shut down*. Okay? So Sheryl, remembering how our family outings are sometimes prone to strange hang-ups with various things going wrong, did what any serious conscientious person would do. She asked the question, “Okay, what if the wire becomes detached by accident?” And to that important question about something that may happen, Merlin replied, “Ah, well, just don’t do that.” My son, Ian, who would be maneuvering the motor, then tried to clarify: “Of course, we’ll try not to do that, but suppose it does happen accidentally.” And again, Merlin said, “Well, ah, just don’t do that.”

So, let me put this in the context of the gospel narrative, in which Jesus, during the time of the Pax Romana, suffers and dies on the cross. ***Just don’t do that?*** And let me put this in the context of my other son, Philip, who (like many of you I’m sure) has had some terribly hard, irreversible heartaches in life. ***Just don’t do that?***

And, you see, this is where communities of faith in Christ like Northwood come into play. This is where we come when damage has been done and it can’t be undone—and for that time of contentiousness and turmoil, Jesus is there. This is where we wonder about the Hallmark card that doesn’t quite resolve the issue, and so we keep talking and keep listening. This is where we drift on the waters of baptism and the motor’s cut out, and we’re wondering if Jesus is still in the water. ###