

HELL-FIRE, HEAVEN-FIRE, & THORNY GRAPES

A sermon on Isaiah 5 : 1-7 and Luke 12 : 49-56

*Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight o Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

So, those readings were ...intense.
There are plenty of comical lists on the internet of
“Things Jesus Never Said” like:
“Go out into the world and twist Scriptures so that no one is offended”
“You don’t like the real me? - let me change my image to fit your needs”

I hope that’s not what I’m doing;
I’ll do my best to give you *an* interpretation that grapples with
this talk of fire and swords,
those things that might be categorized as
“Things We Wish Jesus Never Said” - but did.
and the lectionary suggests we talk about it.



Jesus says he came to bring fire to the earth and
how he wished it were already kindled! Uf Da!
Fire is a frequent symbol for God throughout the scriptures.

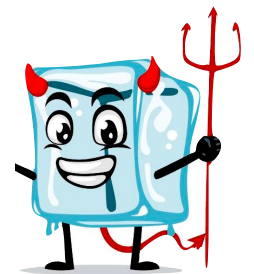
From the burning bush Moses was talking to
and the pillar of fire that led the Hebrew people out of Egypt
to the tongues of Holy Spirit flame at Pentecost.

In the reading from Hebrews for next week, it says “for God is a consuming fire.”

In some conceptions of hell, which depict it as a place cut off from God,
and God-fire, therefore hell is a frozen wasteland.

Even in Dante’s Divine Comedy, written in the 14th century,
Satan himself is trapped in an ice-cube.

It doesn’t quite fit with images most people have.
Indeed, the book of Revelation, there is the Lake of Fire
prepared for the devil and his minions
- it just doesn’t sound like the best place to go swimming.



Other theologians build on the idea of both heaven and hell
being nearness to the fiery presence of God,
with the question being whether or not that is going to be a happy experience.

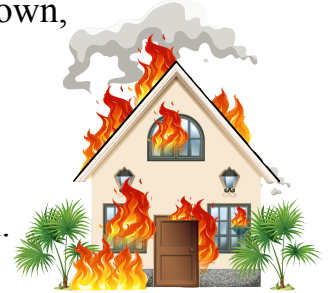
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Fire can be a marvelously wonderful thing.
It gives us warmth and light, it cooks our food,
and can even purify iron and other metals
and make them malleable so they can be shaped into useful tools.

But fire can also destroy your home and everything you own,
as well as giving you some nasty burns.

God, like fire, can be fearsome and painful,
but how the divine is experienced is shaped
by the sort of relationship we've cultivated with Him.



Think about what it is like spending time your father,
even if your dad was the paragon of fatherhood,
when you've gotten into some trouble or another, and you know that he knows what you
did. That's just not going to be a happy interaction.

In the face of the dread of that, you might even judge, or misjudge,
that it would be better to just not.

In the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, there is such a dynamic at play,
this time explained in terms of a vinedresser and his misbehaving vineyard.

In our text it says the vineyard produces wild grapes,
in the Greek translation that many early Christians used,
the vineyard produces ἄκανθα, thorns,



such as those that ever since Genesis
the ground has been cursed to produce.

These thorns in both cases can represent the fruit of unfaithfulness towards God,
produced by the vineyard in place of the fruits of the Spirit
that the divine vinedresser had hoped for.

(But even thorns can be twisted into a crown)



Is God to blame for the thorniness of things?
Isaiah doesn't think so,
but we are invited to consider this matter for ourselves.
"Judge between my vineyard and me" the Lord says.

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Everything possible had been done to promote the growth of good grapes of the spirit.

What's God to do?

At a quick read, you may have thought God was planning on destroying the thorny vine of Israel, but no. What He does is to remove Himself from them, thereby taking away their wall of protection, though He knows what will happen.

In Psalm 104, that we used in the Call to Worship we are told what it is to separate from the source of Life: after talking about all God does for creation, the Psalmist says

*“When You turn away, they are afraid;
when you take away your breath,
they die and go back to the dust from which they came”*

God doesn't have to destroy Israel, in Isaiah's day, some 700 years before Christ, the Assyrians were poised to do that, and they did.



In Psalm 82 in the Good News Translation, God explains *“so I let them go their stubborn ways and do whatever they wanted.”*

But this was never a good solution. Estrangement is not quite the loving relationship God designed us to have with Him.

There is a similar parable - a sort of alternate ending or sequel perhaps - in Luke 13: 6-9, that Jesus tells about a fig tree that hasn't been producing figs, and the key part of that version is even after the master has lost all patience for the fig tree, even then, the keeper of the vineyard insists on giving it yet another chance:

*‘Leave it alone, sir, just one more year;
I will dig around it and put in some fertilizer.
Then if the tree bears figs next year, so much the better;
if not, then you can have it cut down.’*

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To go back to today's Gospel reading,
it is clear that God still cares.
Jesus wouldn't be there at all
if God weren't still invested in the project of humanity.

When He talks about how He came to bring fire to the earth,
and wishes it were kindled,
He is voicing that dissatisfaction with how things are.
He wishes to set fire to the thorns of life, setting things to rights.



The baptism he speaks of, here and elsewhere,
seems equated with his suffering and death.
And he is actually eager for this,
because it is in dying that he can destroy death,
transforming it into eternal life.

As John says in the prologue to his Gospel,
"in Him was life,"
and that Life has infiltrated death,
conquered it,
and destroyed its hold over us.

This is what Jesus was sent to do for us, an important part of it anyway.
That does not mean, as we see him talking about here, that he isn't aware of the pain
involved, and not only for him.

He knows that while divine fire might be purifying,
as we sing in the forth verse of our next hymn - watch for it -
it is also destructive.

Jesus goes on to talk about the divisions
that are going to emerge within households
as a direct result of Him.

The last time I preached on this passage
I told you about one of the early Christian martyrs, Perpetua,
and how her father begged and pleaded with her
to essentially renounce Christ,
and therefore avoid being thrown to the beasts.



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This was one form of division,
but many others were of angrier nature.

And even now religion is one of those topics to never bring up
at Thanksgiving dinner, lest peace give way to swords.

In the last part of today's Gospel reading,
Jesus seems to express some frustration
about how even his own disciples didn't understand.



Weather prediction is difficult enough,
but as Jesus points out,
we often do have at least basic ideas of
what we might expect;
rain from dark clouds in the west,
heat from a southerly wind.

But we tend to be far less attentive to the spiritual realm.
Even those first disciples had expectations of what the Messiah would be and do,
that didn't account for the reality that faced them.

Do we recognize when we are far from God, producing thorny wild grapes?

Do we recognize who we are as images of the invisible God?

Do we recognize that in others?

Do we recognize our purpose in growing in the likeness of Christ?

Do we see our daily lives as having spiritual significance?

How do we expect we will experience God face to face?

Now to the One

who by the power at work within us

is able to do far more abundantly

than all we can ask or imagine,

to God be glory in the church

and in Christ Jesus

to all generations, forever and ever.

Amen.