

**THE FIRE NEXT TIME**  
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20th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Isaiah 5:1-7**

*The Holy One expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!*

**Luke 12:49-56**

*Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"*

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Rage is burning like fire across our nation and around the world. The scorned and forgotten of our nation rage against a smug, self-serving establishment. Black Lives Matter rage against the police and the police fire back. ISIS rages against a certain world smug in its privilege, power, prosperity and heresies. And that world fires back.

And so bombs explode in cars. Bombs fall from the sky. Bodies are torn apart. And other kinds of "bombs" explode from presidential campaign rhetoric. National and racial unity is torn apart.

Anger is like fire. It can destroy or it can create. It all depends.

According to the Greek myth, Prometheus sneaked behind the back of Zeus to give mortals the gift of fire. For that, Prometheus was forever tortured by Zeus. Zeus did not want mortals to have the power to remake the world or themselves. But it was too late. We got it. Fire in our hands. And fire in our imaginations.

Fire seethes in the heart of many here today, a fire of frustration with so much injustice, stupidity, bigotry, and willful ignorance in our land. Anger is a healthy reaction to such things. Anger is a healthy reaction to real or imagined injustice against ourselves or those we love.

Anger is like fire. It can create and it can destroy. It all depends.

That fire burning in many souls today is not unlike the fire that burned in the souls of enslaved Africans when they sang: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign / no more water—the fire next time." That Negro spiritual inspired James Baldwin's 1963 book, *The Fire Next Time*.

In that book Baldwin laments and indicts the Christian church for its hypocrisy in denying its complicity in the torture and oppression of the black race. Our forthcoming Sunday seminar on *race* will take a long, deep look at that lament and that indictment. Christians, of all people, should have known better. But most were willfully blind.

*You hypocrites, cries Jesus in the gospel lesson for today! You know how to forecast the weather and interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? Does anybody know what time it is? Does anybody understand these times?*

Which is to say: You are so smart. You are so well educated. You are so savvy. So why, then, can't you see what's goin' on right under your nose. As Bob Dylan put in "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "You don't need to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

Do we know which way the wind is blowing? Does anybody understand these times? Can we see what's now been exposed in our nation?

Jesus was angry at the way things were. The Beloved loves too much not to get angry. Love does not exclude anger.

In the Old Testament lesson today (Isaiah 5:1-7) God is outraged with the so-called chosen people for allowing injustice to thrive in their society. Love does not exclude anger. Anger however must be tempered by compassion less it become hurtful and destructive.

Even God, according to the Great Ancestors, had to learn that lesson.

Once upon a time, God got angry at the way things were and sent a flood to wipe out humanity because God was disgusted with their violent and unjust ways. That story seems to locate the anger in a distant God above the earth. But there's another way of hearing that story.

In that mythic folk tale human anger and frustration are projected onto God when in fact it actually reflects our own reaction to an unjust world. How many times have you felt like wiping out all the bad and evil people in the world, people like ISIS, or perhaps your in-laws, or your obnoxious neighbors, and starting all over with just you and the other few good folk of the world?

According to the story of The Flood, God learned a lesson, which is to say: *humans learned a lesson*. The story ends with a rainbow in the sky as if to say, violence cannot end violence. Another way must be found.

And certain partisans in our country better learn that lesson soon.

*God gave Noah the rainbow sign / no more water the fire next time.*

*"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, not peace but rather division!*

*Families, said Jesus, will be divided against themselves.* How can that be the mission of Jesus? How can that be good?

Well, it would not be good unless it releases families, tribes and nation from blind loyalties that prevent them from embracing and practicing a higher and wider form of love. The love Jesus calls for is love of all, not just our own family, race, tribe or nation. Jesus calls us to love our enemies; not just our friends.

To embrace that vision and live it can and will cause divisions. It just will. The more the promise of Christ's reign of universal love spreads—not some *religion*, but love and compassion—the more some people will feel threatened. They will resort to bigotry and fear-mongering, trying to hang on to their privileges and position, trying to preserve the old world and its sham unity.

If you embrace and practice universal kinship—the vision of Christ's reign of love—you will at times have to stand your ground. Some just can't stand such all-inclusive love.

*I have not come to bring peace* can be set alongside what Jesus said elsewhere: *peace I leave with; not the peace the world gives. I give you my peace.*

Which is to say, not everything we call *peace* is peace. Peace without justice is no peace. Tranquility, maybe, but not peace. *Law and order* without justice, without healing divisions, and without compassion is not peace. It's a sham.

*God gave Noah the rainbow sign / no more water the fire next time*

Water and more water will never convert a lump of coal. Only fire can. Hate and more hate will not transform a broken world. Only love can.

We can settle for tranquility, serenity, cordiality and mere tolerance. And those aren't bad things. But we could take the fire of love, go deeper, cleanse wounds and heal divisions in the world at large and in our own small world.

Deep peace, God's peace is already in your hands.