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Teaching the **FAITH**

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Ite, inflamate omnia!

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August 17, 2025—20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Jeremiah 38.4-6, 8-10; Hebrews 12.1-4; Luke 12.49-53

In Sunday's Gospel reading, for the third time in Luke, Jesus announces the reason for his coming (see also 4.43; 5.32; 19.10; 4.18-19). This time Jesus emphasizes that he has come to set fire to the world (literally, "Fire I have come to bring upon the earth"), and to establish family divisions! This announcement is difficult to grasp, at least at first blush. The metaphor of fire in this passage is ambiguous, and his aim of bringing familial divisions rather than peace seems at odds with other passages in Luke. We should understand this passage by thinking about it as part of the Luke-Acts narrative. We will see that it regards the mystery of judgment and salvation as not only an eschatological reality, but one at work in the Church even now. The paired readings from Jeremiah and Hebrews allow one also to perceive the initial spark and to know how to fan the flames ardently desired by the Lord.

The Sign of Fire

In the Old Testament fire is symbolic mainly in three ways. It indicates the presence of God who comes to reveal his salvific will (see, for example, Exod 3.2; 19.18). It is also the instrument of divine wrath whereby the unjust are destroyed (Gen 19.24; Deut 4.24; 2 Kgs 1.10; Joel 2.30; Mal 3.2). And it is a symbol of God's heavenly glory (Ezek 1.27; Dan 7.9; 10.6). The New Testament similarly symbolizes fire, most frequently as a metaphor for temporal (Luke 9.54; 17.26-30) and eschatological (2 Thess 1.7-8; 1 Cor 3.13-15; Heb 10.27; 2 Pet 3.7) judgment. *The Book of Revelation* provides the best examples of fire for heavenly glory.

What does Jesus mean by referring to his mission as setting the world ablaze? The immediate context suggests both revelation and judgment. The parable of the vigilant servants and its explanation (Luke 12.35-48) is concerned with judgment, as is the later teaching about settling with an opponent rather than going to court (12.57-59). A main theme of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, beginning in Luke 9.51, is the increasing conflict between the leaders of Israel and Jesus, which is based on their refusal to acknowledge the identity of Jesus and

their ultimate rejection of him and his mission. Under this threat, which will lead to Jesus' passion, the theme of revelation in the midst of judgment is central: "There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known" (Luke 12:2). Accordingly, Jesus' mission to set the world on fire pertains both to revealing the divine will and divine judgment.

A broader view of the Luke-Acts work confirms and clarifies the nature of the relationship between fire, revelation, and judgment in the coming of Jesus. There are two fundamental passages that refer to the fire Jesus announces in Luke 12:49. First, John announces the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, the mightier one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He explains Jesus' baptism as one of judgment, where wheat is gathered and chaff is burned (Luke 3:16-17). Jesus' coming inaugurates this time of judgment, which is a time of wrath and a time of salvation. The touchstone is repentance and good fruits rather than Abrahamic lineage, as was thought by some of John's hearers (3:7-9). Secondly, the episode of the first Pentecost inaugurates the time of the Church, in which Jesus' apostles are baptized with the Holy Spirit by "tongues as of fire" and begin to carry forth the work of witnessing to Jesus from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, (descendants of Abraham), and to the ends of the earth (not of the Abrahamic blood-line) (Acts 1:4, 8; 2:2-4). The remainder of the book of Acts narrates the fulfillment of this mission. The apostles proclaim the gospel both to "the whole house of Israel" and "to whomever the Lord our God will call" (2:36, 39). This mission empowered by the flames of the Holy Spirit results in the same Spirit poured out upon all flesh (2:17; see Joel 3:1-5).

The wider context allows one to penetrate more deeply into today's Gospel passage. The fire which Jesus came to ignite is the fire of the Holy Spirit spread through the proclamation of the Gospel. Like the fire at Mount Sinai, this fire reveals God himself and his will to the whole world. This revelatory fire is kindled by the risen Lord in the hearts of his disciples on the way to Emmaus: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). At the same time, it is the fire of divine judgment. Those who receive it are saved (Acts 2:47); those who reject it are condemned (Acts 13:46). The divinely ordained baptism which "holds" or "governs" Jesus (rather than "causes anguish," *pace* NAB) indicates his ministry in general, culminating in his passion, so that the Holy Spirit is given to his Church (Luke 24:46-49).

Peace and Division

What can be made of Jesus' claim that he has not come to establish peace on earth? This is a unique declaration, yet not unexpected. Simeon had prophesied that "this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (Luke 2:34; see also Matt 10:34). But the motif of peace is pervasive. For example, the prophecy of Zechariah foresees peace with the coming of Jesus (Luke 1:79); the angelic hosts proclaim peace on earth in the hearing of the shepherds at the annunciation of his birth (1:14); after two miracles, Jesus sends the healed women with the command to "go in peace" (7:50; 8:48). His disciples are sent with the command to proclaim peace to any household they enter (10:5). Finally, the resurrected Lord greets his apostles "peace be with you" (24:36). Clearly the establishment of peace is not to be excluded. However, the peace foreseen by the coming of Jesus is inseparable from the response of faith to his person and his teachings. The phenomenon of rejection of Jesus and his gospel is manifested in divisions between individual members of what are meant to be intimate relationships, whether members of the ruling classes of the People of God, who contradict Jesus and eventually put him to death, or family members of the same household. At stake in each of these is the unity and well-being of the people in relation to God.

Division within the family brought about by Jesus arises from the response of the family members to the gospel, some of whom receive Jesus in faith, while others reject him in unbelief. The saying in Luke 12:52-53 is a loose quotation of Micah 7:6, where familial strife is the result of faithlessness to the prophetic word in Israel. Jesus taught that "my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it" (Luke 8:21; see also 14:26). The purpose of Jesus' coming is analogous to that of the Old Testament prophets in this regard, which is to definitively reveal and establish the divine plan, whose corollary is the manifestation of divine judgment in accordance with human freedom.

The Sunday Gospel reading is well-prepared for by the reading from the Prophet Jeremiah. The context of Jeremiah 38.4-6, 8-10 is the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonian armies just before its fall in 586 BC. Zedekiah had asked Jeremiah to intercede for the safety of the city, and the Lord's response was that the king and the city would fall to the Babylonians and be set fire unless he surrender to them. This prophetic message, faithfully and openly spoken by Jeremiah, was rejected by the leaders. They evaluated Jeremiah's prophecy harshly: "[H]e is not seeking the welfare (Hebrew: *shalom* = peace) of our people, but their ruin" (Jer 38.4). Thus, they sought to kill him for the crime of treason by lowering him into an empty cistern. A cistern is a deep, pear-shaped pit with a narrow opening and wider basin to collect rain as a water supply. Being summer, the cistern was empty, but the bottom was a muddy sludge, into which Jeremiah sank. Here he would not be able to continue to prophecy, nor even to live.

The figure Ebed-melech who intercedes for Jeremiah is a foreigner serving in Zedekiah's court. It is ironic that the foreigner, and not the leaders of Judah, recognizes the truth of the prophetic word. Zedekiah, the Babylonian appointed king of Judah, is easily swayed one way or the other. Rather than adhering to the divine word, he seeks political expediency. In this way Jeremiah is saved from death, but left imprisoned in the court of the guard until the eventual fall of the city to the Babylonians and the demise of Zedekiah and Judah. The Church fathers see this episode in the life of Jeremiah as a type of significant mysteries in the life of Christ: the rejection of his divine message, his being handed over to Pilate, his descent into hell, and his resurrection from the dead. Proclaiming the word of God to a people intent on following their own will results in the rejection of the prophet. Jeremiah's sinking into the pit of mud illuminates the baptism with which Jesus must be baptized, and which governs him until it is accomplished.

The second reading, taken from Hebrews 12.1-4, is an exhortation that exemplarily incorporates themes from both the first reading and the Gospel. The passage provides an explicit hinge between the faith of Old Testament figures, the life and work of Jesus, and the faith which believers are to exemplify. The passage from Hebrews the Church proclaimed on the previous Sunday (Heb 11.1-2, 8-19) extols the faith of the ancient forerunners. Unnamed, yet included among the heroes of Israel, is Jeremiah. He is among the cloud of witnesses looking upon Christians who, laying aside the burden of sin in becoming disciples of Jesus, now must take upon themselves the requirements of the faith. Jesus, the founder of true faith, is the sign of contradiction (Luke 2.34) who accepted the shame of the cross in order to enter into his glory (Heb 12.1-4). It is the task of the Christian to enter the way of faith in Jesus, following him even to the point of shedding blood. The baptism with which Jesus is intent on being baptized is also the baptism of the faithful (Luke 3.16-17; Mark 10.39). The Christian must also resist the contradiction of sinners and, in the Holy Spirit, be governed by faithful endurance until the fire ardently desired by Jesus is accomplished in this world—through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love—and reaches fulfillment in the next.

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For Further Reading

Pope Benedict XVI, [Homily on the Solemnity of Pentecost](#)

Pablo T. Gadenz, [The Gospel of Luke](#)

In Short . . .

- *Jesus' mission to set the world on fire concerns revealing the divine will and establishing divine judgment.*
- *The fire which Jesus came to ignite is the fire of the Holy Spirit spread through the Church's proclamation of the gospel.*
- *Division is the result of either reception or rejection of the gospel.*
- *It is the task of the Christian to follow the way of faith in Jesus and so to enter into his glory.*