

### “People Get Ready”

OK. Let's stop right there. Who stole my Jesus? What happened to the Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world? All of a sudden I feel like I have been thrown back into my childhood and the fire and brimstone preachers I grew up with. Those preachers who told us how bad we were and how the Judgment Day was just around the corner and we better get right with God or we would be sorry for all eternity. This is a Jesus they could really get down with.

Whenever I get stuck in a passage like this I wonder about what is going on around the passage. In real estate the old saw is “location, location, location.” In biblical study the adage could be “context, context, context.” While today we read this section of Luke in isolation, in truth it does not exist in isolation; far from it. We have been on a journey with Jesus in Luke this summer. Let's see if there are any contextual clues that might help with passage.

From the last Sunday of May and through most of June, Jesus' ministry was around the Sea of Galilee—the Jewish and Gentile sides. During that time he healed a Centurion's slave,<sup>1</sup> raised a widow's son from the dead,<sup>2</sup> blessed and forgave a woman of the city,<sup>3</sup> and healed a man with demons.<sup>4</sup>

But at the end of June Jesus makes an important decision to, “set his face toward Jerusalem.”<sup>5</sup> That sounds ominous. There is tension in his turning towards Jerusalem, and the tension increases with each new encounter. Even the good events have strong and sometimes uncomfortable lessons in them. After the successful evangelism of the seventy disciples Jesus warns them not to rejoice in worldly success.<sup>6</sup> When he visits Martha and Mary he tells us that keeping busy is not the answer.<sup>7</sup>

Then there are those that challenge Jesus—a lawyer,<sup>8</sup> and a disgruntled brother.<sup>9</sup> He answers them with parables about a good Samaritan and a foolish rich man. These are parables that turn the world upside down in many ways. Not the least of which is that in Jesus' time there was no such thing as a Good

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 7:1-10

<sup>2</sup> Luke 7:11-17

<sup>3</sup> Luke 7:37-50

<sup>4</sup> Luke 8:26-37

<sup>5</sup> Luke 9:51

<sup>6</sup> Luke 10:1-24

<sup>7</sup> Luke 10:38-42

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:25-37

<sup>9</sup> Luke 12:13-21

Samaritan. All Samaritans were considered to be evil and of the lowest kind. In contrast riches were considered a sign of God's favor, yet in the parable the rich man is nothing but a greedy fool.

Just a week ago we heard Jesus say to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."<sup>10</sup> And "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."<sup>11</sup> Jesus is pointing his flock of little lambs with gentleness and care toward a loving God who has "unfailing treasure"<sup>12</sup> for them in heaven.

Thus it is rather jarring to come to today's Gospel where Jesus is calling for fire. What in the world happened? Well, the simple answer is that Luke 12:41-48 happened. The compilers of our lectionary left out eight verses that might help us understand what is going on in today's lesson.

Throughout my life I have taught at schools and colleges sometimes as faculty and sometimes as a substitute. One of those times I was substituting for ten-days teaching middle school. Five days in I was feeling that I was getting the rhythm of the day, to know the students, to enjoy teaching and interacting with them, and feel that many of them were enjoying the experience also. On the fifth day, a Thursday, the morning started as usual with the hectic-ness of home room. Then I settled into the teaching periods. All seemed to go well with first period. By the second period I was really feeling it. This was my little flock, and so it continued with third period. We were rocking and rolling, the give and take was great, the questions were good, they were making observations I had not gotten from college students. Even as I was getting tired the fourth period seemed to go well and I had a second wind.

Then sixth period happened. This group did not seem to understand anything. I had to explain the same topic over and over again. I would no sooner finish one explanation than a hand would go up asking the exact same question. What was going on here? Where did the magic go? Where was my little flock? What began as a day of success, pleasure, excitement, and joy had turned into exhausting disappointment.

So I imagine it was with Jesus. He is loving his little flock and then Peter, poor Peter, asks Jesus, "Are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?" I imagine Jesus restraining himself with a sigh. He answers Peter with another parable. This one is about slaves who are put in charge of their master's property. If the slave is diligent and faithful in his duties the master gives him more responsibility. If he is not faithful as he tires of waiting for his master's

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 12:32

<sup>11</sup> Luke 12:34

<sup>12</sup> Luke 12:33

return he is punished. Jesus ends with a famous verse saying, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." That is, he is telling Peter that the parable is for everyone. Everyone is to get ready for the Kingdom, but you disciples have even more responsibility because I have picked you myself. It is at that point that today's reading picks up with fire.

What kind of fire is it? I expect many of us think Jesus is calling for a cleansing fire; perhaps the fires of Hades. That is the easy answer, and would please the preachers of my youth. But there are other kinds of fire, and in Luke fire is indicative of passion and love. Remember the two disciples on the road to Emmaus with the risen Jesus whose hearts are burning within them as Jesus unfolds the scriptures.<sup>13</sup> Later it is tongues of fire that settle above the disciples' heads on the day of Pentecost.<sup>14</sup> Fire is not damaging in Luke's Gospel it is a symbol of God's presence within us.

This is not Jesus sounding more like John the Baptist; this is Jesus at his most human. He is frustrated that not even his disciples are getting his message. He wants them and all of us to burn with the love of God, but he realizes that before that happens many people will be alienated to one another because they do not understand. This is Jesus' cry of lament that is as loud and as anguished as when he shouts from the cross.

In his frustration, he shouts that we know how to tell changes in the weather but we cannot recognize what is right in front of us. The Son of God is here, teaching, preaching, healing, and even goading us toward new thinking and a new Kingdom. Then to emphasize what we heard last week of being ready for the Kingdom, he tells us to get right with our neighbor now, don't wait. But even with his urging he will follow today's passage with a parable about a fig tree that does not bear fruit and its owner wants to cut down, but the gardener refuses to give up. God's love is persistent.

To put it in more mundane terms, when we encounter Jesus in the Gospel today, he has hit his fifth period. He is exhausted with the dumb questions from Peter, that the crowds come to listen, but don't seem to hear. He is perturbed that the fire he wants to light in our hearts is not glowing brightly; brightly enough to cause the division that heralds the breaking in of the Kingdom of God. The division that means the breaking up of the old order, and the old hurts, and that proclaims a new world and healing.

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<sup>13</sup> Luke 24:32

<sup>14</sup> Acts 2:3

Be ready he calls again and again. Words that were echoed in the '60s by Curtis Mayfield when he sang:

“People get ready, there's a train a comin'  
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board  
All you need is faith, to hear the diesels hummin'  
Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.”<sup>15</sup>

Jesus called again and again for us to get ready, but it is not out of fear of punishment or the burning fires of Hades. He wants us to open our hearts to the fire of God's love. Let our hearts burn within us like the disciples walking to Emmaus and at Pentecost. Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom has already broken in. It is here right now, all we need is the faith to make it burn brightly within us. The train is coming and no baggage or ticket is need. All we need is the love of God in Christ. And for that, brothers and sisters, we can thank the Lord.

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<sup>15</sup> Curtis Mayfield. “People Get Ready” ©1965

Two favorite versions are The Impressions <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l04yM7-BWbg>  
Rod Stewart and Jeff Beck [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yC\\_j\\_dzkaVE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yC_j_dzkaVE)