**To bring a fire**

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Luke 12:49–56

49 “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53 they will be divided:

father against son

and son against father,

mother against daughter

and daughter against mother,

mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law

and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

54 He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. 56 You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?[[1]](#footnote-1)

I was baptized when I was in high school. I had made a profession of faith, and had been attending a small church for a while, but I hadn’t yet been baptized. I don’t know if my pastor suggested it, or what, but I talked to my mother about it, and asked her what she thought. “Billy,” she said, “you should really think hard about this. If you get baptized, you will be part of that church you’re entire life.” What she didn’t say, but I think even then I knew, was that my choosing to be baptized was to choose something different; I was creating a break between her and me, between my brothers and me, between what her family stood for and me. She didn’t really oppose it, she just saw something of the plain facts: baptism was going to create a division. I was going to choose *that* way instead of *her* way.

This passage has a very apocalyptic feel to it, doesn’t it, with its emphasis of fire and even that passage about looking at the sky and predicting what’s next? Perhaps, though, it’s not so very much about apocalyptic things. In fact, Jesus doesn’t here say, watch out for what happens next, but “interpret the present time.” Like my mother, I think, he is describing some plain facts.

The first plain fact Jesus describes is his own emotional state, as he looks into his immediate future and understands that he is about to undergo a baptism. His baptism isn’t to be dunked in the waters of Crystal Lake, like mine, or even to be dunked again in the waters of the Jordan River, like his own water baptism. No, his baptism is a baptism of betrayal, torture, and painful death. Is it any wonder that he felt the stress of that? Sometimes we feel stress even when we anticipate a good thing is about to happen; how much more when we anticipate a very bad thing is about to happen! Jesus was very aware of what was about to happen to him and the ones he loved. And he very understandably just wanted it to be over with.

The second plain fact Jesus describes is that although the fire of his movement was about to spread widely, that the Spirit was about to be poured out on all kinds of people, this movement, really like any serious movement, was creating sharp divisions. I’m sure it was happening even as he was speaking. In some rural village, a son was arguing with his mother about his need to leave home, and obey after this rabbi who said, “Come, follow me.” Outside some synagogue, there was a Pharisee who was telling his companions that he thought Jesus was the promised one, and his companions, who had known him since birth, were extremely angry. In some wealthy home, a wife was angering her husband by insisting on giving money to support Jesus and his ministry. People were arguing, divided, unreconciled. Because how could they be reconciled at this level, except to agree to follow Jesus or to not follow Jesus? This wasn’t a question of just live and let live; this was a question of life and death.

The third plain fact that Jesus describes is that we should be about interpreting the times. And I think he is saying that’s it’s not really all that hard. It’s like looking up into the morning sky, seeing the menacing sky, and knowing that it’s going to rain on your garage sale. If you know me at all, you might suspect that I’ll have a problem with Jesus saying that it’s relatively simple to interpret the times. My usual answer to almost any question will be something like, “It’s complicated.”

And we do live in complicated times, of course. (Jesus did, too).

So, what is easy about interpreting the times?

It can’t be something like a political solution, a party solution. It can’t be that Republicans good, Democrats bad, or Republicans bad, Democrats good. The parties interpret the times very differently, and it seems very unlikely that Jesus would align himself with Republicans or Democrats.

It can’t be something like being simply a matter of education: that people are just ignorant sometimes, and if we just taught them better, everything would be all right, and understand the times we live in. Throughout history, many clever and educated people have been very, very mistaken.

It can’t be a matter of lifestyle, or what we eat, or art, or whatever you name it. As important as politics and education and lifestyle are, their answers are always complicated in the way of my usual answers.

Here’s what I think Jesus is saying about interpreting the times. He understands what is happening around him as pertaining to the coming of the Kingdom of God. If you see something happening, you should ask yourself, what does this have to do with God’s reign? For his own specific situation, this was about his coming death and resurrection, and the start of the kingdom movement.

But this chapter alone helps us to understand the times we live in, in very direct ways.

Verses 1-3 remind us that God will reveal every word we speak and action we undertake, and so we understand that even the most powerful evils will be exposed in God’s time, and even our most secret sins will be revealed in God’s time. So we can take hope in our fear of the powerful, and we can take steps to amend our lives.

Verses 4-12 remind us that we should fearlessly confess God and God’s kingdom, and that those who would persecute us for that fact will turn out to be wrong in the end. We see opposition as an opportunity to rely on the Holy Spirit for the right words.

Verses 13-34 remind us that money means nothing, except as it serves God well.

Verses 35-40 remind us that God may cut our lives, and even the life of the world, short at any moment, and we should attend to God’s coming.

Verse 41-48 remind us that what we are doing is of immense importance: we have been entrusted with so much.

Interpreting the times is simple. I think it is simply a matter of asking the question: how, in these times, can we love God better? How can we love our neighbors better? These kingdom lenses will help us to see God’s action at work.

Of course, simple things can still be simple and at the same time be *hard*. The way of following Jesus can be hard indeed. It can lead to to stress; it can lead to death; it can lead to divisions with those we love, even as we enter into the kingdom of love and joy and delight.

My question to myself and to you is this: What things about the current times confuse *you*? How does viewing the current times though the lenses of love help you discern the times?

1. Revised Common Lectionary. (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)