

“Is That What Jesus Said?”

Scripture: Luke 12:49-53

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There is a wonderful but apparently false analogy that I have heard used and which I have used myself that says the Chinese word for crisis is a combination of danger and opportunity. Remember that there is no Chinese alphabet but each Chinese character is a picture gram. And so it is often said that the Chinese character that represents the word “crisis” is a combination of the symbol for danger and for opportunity. The point is, that is what a crisis is...danger and opportunity.

Unfortunately, the linguistic argument is a bit weak...sort of like arguing that a butterfly is an insect that flits through the air like yellow grease—like butter flying. False derivation! However, crisis is the theme for today...and, never mind the Chinese analogy does not work, a crisis is both danger and opportunity. Listen to Jesus’ crisis words:<sup>1</sup>

Luke 12:49-52:

<sup>49</sup> “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup> I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup> Do

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1 **Alternate beginning:** An American poet, son of a minister, writes a poem called “The Present Crisis.” The poem protests the unjust war involvement of the United States. The poet argues that the cause of the war has been economic self-interest of some and that lies and deception have been told to move the country forward into war. The poet is joined by a congressman with a stellar Republican lineage who says, “Allow the President to invade a neighboring country whenever he shall deem it necessary . . . and you allow him to make war at pleasure...”

“The Present Crisis”...sounds like a story-line for a television docudrama, except in this case, it would be an historical docudrama. The year is 1845. The poet is James Russell Lowell. The congressman is Abraham Lincoln. And the war is the Mexican-American War, to which there is a consensus among historians that greed and power drove this nation into war and that deception was a major part of convincing the public of the justice of the war.

As a child, I grew up singing a portion of the poem by James Russell Lowell—didn’t know the history of the poem then, “The Present Crisis.” I also did not know the poem by the original title, only by the first line...the first line in the Presbyterian Hymnbook. Some of you may remember it:

Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;

Then the last verse...

Though the cause of evil prosper, yet the truth alone is strong;  
Though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong;  
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.

Truth is on the scaffold...evil on the throne or in power...but the scaffold sways the future. And God is still in the midst of it all.

The present crisis...1845 in the United States...2007 in the United States...or, perhaps the dateline should be 30 A.D. in the back hills of the Roman province of Galilee, where a wandering teacher from Nazareth says the crisis words we have for today:

you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!<sup>52</sup>  
From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;<sup>53</sup>  
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.”

Not the usual words of Jesus “meek and mild,” are they? These are crisis words. Here Jesus, the Prince of Peace, speaks words about kindling fire, a stressful baptism, and division instead of peace. These are crisis words...and a crisis calls for a decision.

Fire: that’s the passion for service to God. Jesus says, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” Somehow we have ended up waiting to be kindled. Years ago, Garth Brooks, of country music fame had a song in the 1990’s called, “Standing Outside the Fire” with the chorus that went

Standing outside the fire  
Standing outside the fire  
Life is not tried—it is merely survived  
If you're standing outside the fire

There’s this love that is burning  
Deep in my soul  
Constantly yearning to get out of control  
Wanting to fly higher and higher  
I can’t abide standing outside the fire

I can’t abide standing outside the fire. Jesus speaks of fire he wants to kindle...and like Garth Brooks, it is this love that will not give up. Can we be on fire in the Presbyterian Church and it not be about the color of the paint that I don’t like, the kind of music I don’t like, the people that I don’t like, the committee meeting that I don’t like? Jesus is certainly about another kind of fire that consumes us: the love of God and the love of neighbor. And there is decision here to be made. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said something to the effect that success in faith is not the result of spontaneous combustion, of accidental ignition. No, you have got to set your self on fire for it. How often we stand outside the fire and wonder why we are not “on fire!”

And that brings us to the second aspect of crisis in Jesus’ words. Jesus says, “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” Jesus has already been baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, so that it is not what is meant here. No, here baptism means an immersion...a full immersion that no half way participation will work.

There are so many things in life that require immersion...to my knowledge, no one has ever learned to swim by simply putting their feet in the water—you learn to swim finally when you go in over

your head. To truly ride a bicycle, both feet have to come off the ground—you are not riding a bicycle when you keep one foot on the ground. To ride an elevator, you have to go all the way in and not leave a foot outside the door. Jesus is saying, I have a calling that requires my total self. No more hokey-pokey of putting right or left hand in...it is putting your whole self in. We know what that is for Jesus...he is on the way to Jerusalem, where he will lay down his life because of the fire that drives him.

The crisis requires our whole selves. Not just fire...but our whole selves. Some of you may have caught the recent movie *Evan Almighty*, a Hollywood spin on the story of Noah and the Ark...worth seeing as another set of eyes on this Biblical story. Evan, a recently elected Congressman, is the Noah-character. So God ask him to build an ark. Building an ark is not a culturally acceptable thing to do...it is not even a rational thing to do...it will not win you many votes...it requires putting your whole self in because people will laugh, poke fun, and not take you seriously. In the movie, as George Burns did decades ago in the series of movies called, *O God*, the African-American actor Morgan Freeman gets to play the role of God.

In perhaps one most theological moments of the movie, this God-figure has a conversation with Evan who is skeptical about stepping out on faith. So God asks Evan—do I make you courageous, or do I provide you with opportunities to be courageous? Quite a question. Does God make us what we ought to be? Or is that God enables us and provides us with the opportunities to be our best selves? Our baptisms, like Jesus' baptism, mark us as belonging to God. We are named children of God. Each baptism I paraphrase the words from 1 John that say, "See what love the Father has given us—he calls us his children and so we are!" That's our baptism...but there is more. Our baptism simply put us in the place to experience crisis...the time of decision. God gives the opportunity for us live and be who we are in our baptism. It calls for wholeselves.

Fire...baptism...and division. Jesus says, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" This is the same Jesus of whom the angels sing at his birth, "Peace on earth and goodwill to those whom God favors." This is the same Jesus who said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." This is the same Jesus who said no longer shall you practice an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth in retribution. No, if struck on the cheek, offer the other cheek.

It is not that Jesus' purpose is to cause the division...it is that division will come if you choose to stay with him. He speaks of division, primarily between generations: parents and children, but the implication is that those who would naturally be close to each other are divided. Some of know one or more of those family divisions. Perhaps you even know the family that can talk about most anything except "religion and politics."

The crisis of division comes as we live out who we are. Jesus does not cause the division...but who are may create division. A Roman Catholic Priest named John Powell, a professor at Loyola University in Chicago tells of a division—a division that took place in annual class he taught the "Theology of Faith."<sup>2</sup> The particular division was with a student named named Tommy. Tommy

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/j/johnpowell.htm> According to this website, the story was written by Father John Powell, a retired professor at Loyola University in Chicago. Father Powell is advanced in years, but TruthOrFiction.com found him and talked with him. The story was fresh in his mind and he confirmed that it is true and happened in the way that he described it.

was a long-haired rebel in his class...the “atheist in residence.”

Says Father Powell,

“He constantly objected to, smirked at, or whined about the possibility of an unconditionally loving Father/God. We lived with each other in relative peace for one semester, although I admit he was for me at times a serious pain in the back pew. When he came up at the end of the course to turn in his final exam, he asked in a cynical tone,

“Do you think I’ll ever find God?”

I decided instantly on a little shock therapy.

“No!” I said very emphatically.

“Why not,” he responded, “I thought that was the product you were pushing.”

I let him get five steps from the classroom door and then called out,

“Tommy! I don’t think you’ll ever find Him, but I am absolutely certain that He will find you!”

Tommy kept walking but just a couple years later Father Powell heard that the recently graduated Tommy had terminal cancer. And of all things, Tommy came to see Father Powell

Says Father John:

“When he walked into my office, his body was very badly wasted and the long hair had all fallen out as a result of chemotherapy. But his eyes were bright and his voice was firm, for the first time, I believe.

“Tommy, I’ve thought about you so often. I hear you are sick,” I blurted out.

“Oh, yes, very sick. I have cancer in both lungs. It’s a matter of weeks.”

“Can you talk about it, Tom?” I asked.

“Sure, what would you like to know?” he replied.

“What’s it like to be only twenty-four and dying?”

“Well, it could be worse.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like being fifty and having no values or ideals, like being fifty and thinking that booze, seducing women, and making money are the real ‘biggies’ in life.”

“But what I really came to see you about,” Tom said, “is something you said to me on the last day of class.” He continued, “I asked you if you thought I would ever find God and you said, ‘No!’ which surprised me. Then you said, ‘But He will find you.’ I thought about that a lot, even though my search for God was hardly intense at that time. But when the doctors removed a lump from my groin and told me that it was malignant, that’s when I got serious about locating God. And when the malignancy spread into my vital organs, I really began banging bloody fists against the bronze doors of heaven. But God did not come out...In fact, nothing happened. Did you ever try anything for a long time with great effort and with no success? You get psychologically glutted, fed up with trying. And then you quit.”

“Well, one day I woke up, and instead of throwing a few more futile appeals over that high brick wall to a God who may be or may not be there, I just quit. I decided that I didn’t really care about God, about an after life, or anything like that. I decided to spend what time I had left doing

something more profitable. I thought about you and your class and I remembered something else you had said: “The essential sadness is to go through life without loving. But it would be almost equally sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you had loved them.”

“I was only sorry about one thing—that I had waited so long. Here I was, just beginning to open up to all the people I had actually been close to.”

Tommy then told of how the barriers between his dad and him broke down as he told him loved him...barriers between his mother and sister as well. In the midst of this, Tommy concluded:

“Then, one day I turned around and God was there. He didn’t come to me when I pleaded with Him. I guess I was like an animal trainer holding out a hoop, ‘C’mon, jump through. C’mon, I’ll give You three days, three weeks.”

“Apparently God does things in His own way and at His own hour. But the important thing is that He was there. He found me! You were right. He found me even after I stopped looking for Him.”

Father Powell asked Tommy to come back to his present class of Theology of Faith and tell his story. Tommy did not make that appointment...he had another more pressing, more gracefully enlightening appointment with God. But Tommy asked Father Powell to tell story. And others like me to tell it...to acknowledge the division but leave the bridge open to make a connection.

Each day is a new crisis, where decisions are called upon. We can become so nonchalant about the decision-making that we forget how each decision builds on another. That moment comes every day: the crisis calls for a decision: with fire, with baptism, and to accept division. On fire...with the love of Christ. Baptism...to put wholeselves into being members of his body...division...our separation will not be our choice but the world’s choice...but even that separation can be bridged.

In the midst of the crisis, remember some other words of our Lord Jesus: Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

The word of the Lord. AMEN