

No Fire from Heaven

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 26 June 2016. II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Admit it. At times you've wanted to call down fire from heaven on someone.

Maybe it was when your spouse or partner or neighbor did that thing you hate again. Maybe it was on the relative to whom you are bound by blood but as different as night and day. Maybe it was in response to the debate about guns that erupted on social media and in Congress this week. At some point, we've all been like James and John in this passage – very angry and ready to put others in their place. *Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*

The disciples witnessed many miraculous, powerful events in Luke 9, which ends with our gospel lesson for today. Early in the chapter, Jesus sent them out on mission. Luke 9:6 says they, the disciples, cured diseases everywhere. Then Jesus fed 5000 people, which must have impressed them. After that, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain where he was transfigured before them. If they had wondered about his identity before they knew finally he was the real thing. As they came down the mountain, Jesus healed a boy who suffered from seizures by casting an unclean spirit out of him. This is a lot of powerful spiritual experience all at once.

And apparently it went to their heads. In Luke 9:46 we read, *An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest.* ⁴⁷*But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side,* ⁴⁸*and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.'*

That is an important truth of the gospel. The least among us – those we ignore or overlook or dismiss – Jesus says these are the greatest among you. But James and John didn't get the message. So here, when some Samaritans did not welcome them, they claimed spiritual and moral authority and threatened real harm. *Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*

It sounds like hyperbole to us, something the disciples would not be able to do even if they tried. But quite likely, James and John thought they could do this. Elijah had done it on Mt. Carmel in the battle with the prophets of Baal. We read that story a few weeks ago. Peter, James, and John had just seen a vision of Elijah when Jesus was transfigured and his face

shone like the sun. James and John easily thought they had license and ability to do what Elijah did.

In reality, being rejected by the Samaritan villagers should not have surprised them. Jews and Samaritans did not get along. One of the many differences between them was that Jews worshipped God in Jerusalem and Samaritans on Mt. Gerizim. Jesus had just set his face to go to Jerusalem. A travelling rabbi and a bunch of followers on their way to Jerusalem would not have been welcome. So it was no surprise that the Samaritans refused to let them stay in their town.

But rather than accept the obvious, the disciples went too far. They crossed the line from taking offense to seeking harm. They wanted to call down fire from heaven and destroy this village.

So Jesus rebuked them. A later editor of the text, perhaps thinking Jesus sounded too harsh, added these words – “for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” But the earliest versions of the text say simply, “Jesus turned and rebuked them.”

Notice that Jesus did not rebuke the Samaritans. He did not force his way on their village. In Luke 10, he will tell a story praising a good Samaritan. Instead, he turned away from the village and rebuked his disciples. Rebuke is a harsh word in the gospels. It is the same word used when Jesus spoke to demons and cast them out. Jesus was casting a demon out of James and John.

There could be many reasons why James and John responded this way. Maybe they were tired and grumpy. It happens. Maybe they were concerned that Jesus was feeling rejected and wanted to say, “Hey, we’ve got your back.” Maybe out of devotion they were standing up for their friend. But those reasons don’t justify a rebuke. Something more was at stake.

So maybe they were trying to figure out how to be faithful to the call of Jesus in their lives, and in their zeal they crossed a line. The Samaritans were wrong about God, they thought, so like Elijah they should defend God’s truth in a mighty way. But Jesus rebuked them.

We may have felt what they were feeling. The call of Jesus in our lives often puts us at odds with others. Jesus demonstrated that in the next encounters. The call of Jesus was so urgent and important there was not time to find a place to stay or bury dead relatives or say goodbye to family and friends. Jesus wasn’t being mean. He was being clear. The kingdom of God is so important nothing else matters.

But our love and passion and zeal for the way of Jesus do not give us license to harm – not physically, not verbally, not emotionally. That’s why Jesus rebuked James and John. Yes, we need to respond to the urgency of the gospel, but no we are not allowed to call down fire from heaven on anyone. That’s God’s job.

Paul warned the Galatians about the same thing. After Paul helped the people in Galatia become followers of Jesus, another group came along. This group convinced some people in Galatia that they needed to become Jewish and obey Jewish laws in order to follow Jesus and be Christian. Paul was furious about this. He said anyone who listened to these folks was foolish. He was clear that the way of Jesus was open to all people, not just the Jewish people. He passionately defended the truth of the gospel.

But there was a way to defend the truth. He wrote to the Galatians, *If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*

Defending the truth does not require us to harm one another. *Through love, become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*

Paul went on to describe what that love looks like. He called it the fruit of the Spirit. The works of the flesh are obvious – *enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions*. But the fruit of God's Spirit growing in our lives is *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. These are the gifts God's Spirit produces. When you see these gifts, you know the Spirit is present.

So here's why this matters today.

Many things happening in our world today are contrary to the gospel, contrary to God's hopes and intentions and plans for this world. God does not want people to kill each other. God does not want the poor to suffer. God wants immigrants to have a home. God wants to create a human family where differences are embraced and the planet is cared for. And God will win, folks. This is the message of Jesus. God is not waiting until we all get to heaven to sort these things out. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Elijah and Elisha and all the prophets were right. The power of God at work in this world to defend the poor and create justice and provide safety for everyone will prevail. Those who stand in the way of God's mercy will not endure.

So it is in everyone's best interest to get on board with what God is doing. That is why we proclaim the gospel. We preach the good news of God's kingdom because the world needs to know what God is up to. But in doing so, it is not our job to call down fire from heaven on others. That is God's job, not ours. It does not help the purposes of God to perpetuate enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions - the works of the flesh. It does not help the purposes of God to refuse to listen to different points of view. It does not help the purposes of God to threaten harm.

We do take strong stands. Jesus was clear – the way of God's kingdom demands our whole allegiance. The world is better off if we help it seek and follow God's will of peace and

abundance. But we do this in a spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us be guided by the Spirit as we enter the critical debates of our time about guns and immigration and poverty and civility. Let us be guided by the Spirit as we share our positions and learn from others. Let us be guided by the Spirit as we talk to one another, not back at the TV screen, not in our heads, not on Facebook, but in person where it counts. Let us be guided by the Spirit and sincerely listen to those with whom we disagree. May God lead us together into all truth. Amen.

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