

Sermon – Luke 12:49-56; Hebrews 11:29—12:2  
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### “Storm Clouds Rolling In”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. This month marks the seventh anniversary of my arrival at Grace to serve as your Senior Pastor. So, congratulations! You have now put up with me longer than either of my previous congregations. Well done! And not easy, I’m sure. But you continue to persevere, running the race set before you, no matter how many silly sermon openings you must endure. In all seriousness, I count myself blessed to be here, and I’m grateful that we continue to be called to be in ministry together. We *have* endured a fair amount during these seven years, but even more has God given us plenty to celebrate. And thank God for that, for keeping relationships together is no easy thing, whether between pastor and people or between anyone else. So much so that when Jesus proclaims today that he has come not to bring peace to the earth but division, it’s kind of like, “Bring it? It’s already here!”
2. The storms of division swirl around us constantly. Disunity comes so easily. It has become a truism to say that we are a nation politically divided. It feels at times that we live less in *one* polarized world and more in *two* separate worlds that have less and less to do with one another. Events are the same, but the reactions are so different as to make one wonder how we can ever bridge the gaps between us. Look no further than the seemingly straightforward case of a former president hanging onto classified documents. The divergent narratives about what happened, what it means,

- and to what it will all lead are distressing at best. These divisions are not simply deep; they're calcified. How do we begin to overcome them? Never mind the divisions that exist between those of us who are not newsworthy, but whose slowly fraying or suddenly fractured relationships cause so much hurt and harm, to ourselves and others. Division is not much fun. Jesus would add to it?
3. It's worth noting that Jesus has always brought division. The prophecy of his birth brought the threat of division; Joseph almost left Mary when he learned of her pregnancy. He spends his life and ministry creating divisions. This is not, however, because division and disunity are his intention; it is, rather, because of how we respond to his ministry. Jesus eats with sinners. Speaks freely with women. Heals on the Sabbath. Does a million things that the people around him see as wrong. People divide themselves from one another based on their response to Jesus' ministry, and in so doing they bring to light the divisions that were always there beneath the surface. Perhaps they were not as easy to notice before Jesus came. We are pretty good, after all, at keeping a tense peace – by avoiding certain topics at dinner tables or ostracizing those who challenge us. But a tensely held peace is no peace at all. The divisions have been there all along. Jesus brings them to light. Jesus clarifies the situation. And he does so in order to do something about it.
  4. Sometimes we need a shift in perspective to be able to see. During our family's recent vacation to Door County, we stayed in a log cabin that had a fire ring outside (apologies to the handful of folks who've already heard this story). At night I'd build a fire, and we sit around it, telling stories and making s'mores. Knowing how dangerous fire can be, I'd make sure it was completely extinguished before heading to bed. One night, after everyone else was asleep, I stepped out of the cabin to check on the fire, which was no longer bright enough to illuminate anything other than itself. The night was dark; the rural setting offered no ambient light. I walked cautiously off the porch

and through the driveway. When I felt dirt beneath my flip flops, I knew I was close. I could see the last embers glowing gently in the pit. I crouched down in the dark, hands outstretched, feeling for the log benches that stood between me and the fire. I took three steps, four, five, at which point my I was certain I was beyond the benches. I stood tall, took a normal stride toward the fire, and felt my shins, one after the other, collide with a bench. Caught completely off guard, I pitched forward, my face landing in the dirt a little too close to the fire for comfort. Groaning, I rolled over on to my back, looked up, and saw between the trees the grandeur of the night sky, stars burning bright, unimpeded by any of the ambient light I'd wished for a moment before. I had been too focused on what I'd been looking to see, my gaze cast too far down, to see the glory above me. The fire didn't burn me, but it sure knocked me out. And gave me just the shift in perspective I needed.

5. The fire Jesus brings upon the earth is not, however, one of gently burning embers. It is a fire that consumes and, as it consumes, refines and clarifies. But this is not the wild-eyed apocalyptic some might imagine. Jesus connects this oncoming fire to his impending baptism. This is not the gentle baptism of the Jordan, but the harsh baptism of Calvary. While Jesus' ministry was constantly divisive, he finally takes all this division into himself on the cross. Isolated from his friends, division overtakes him: sinew from bone, breath from body. The powers of this world stand against him, united for once in purpose and power. To maintain the peace, Jesus the troublemaker is put to death. There is just one problem, of course. He won't stay dead. The God of life refuses the tidy ending of death. Outward from the empty tomb and through the Spirit poured out in Jerusalem rushes the fire of God. We are consumed, swallowed up in the fiery waters of baptism. Divided now forever from sin and death, we are free to work in Jesus' name for true peace and unity, not cheap imitations in which no dissent is brooked. Yes, working for the sake of the gospel will create division in this divided world, but only because this world is in so many ways opposed to its Creator. We work to

witness to the world come, the new creation in which we all take our places, together, around the throne of the Lamb.

6. We are brought low by the fire, passing from death to life in baptism. We receive a new perspective. We are able now to read the signs differently, for we ourselves are marked with the sign of the cross. The fire of our Lord is not safely contained, but it finally serves not destruction but creation, not death but life. So enlivened and illuminated, our lives are ablaze with purpose. The poet Mary Oliver writes, "The gospel of light is the crossroads – of indolence, or action." Indolence or action? Confronted by the call of Jesus, friends, Oliver's options yield a question: Will we be lazy, or will we burn brightly? The poet supplies the answer: "Be ignited, or be gone." Yes, be ignited and run the course set before you. Shine for the world to see, signs of a different way amidst this world's divisive storms. See new clouds rolling in, bearing not thunder and lightning but the very witness of the saints who have gone before us. Know the true peace, the peace the world cannot give, now received by these saints – by Bob Carlson, and Carolyn Martin, and all the other witnesses we recently have or soon will lay to rest. By faith, they passed through. By faith, we will, too. This old, divided world is now aflame with the living presence of Christ, and you live now with his fire in your souls. Be ignited or be gone. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.