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Pentecost 10

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Fighting Fire with Fire”

Text: Luke 12:49-56; Jeremiah 23:16-29; Hebrews 11:1-16; Gradual

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

What if today was the first time you ever stepped foot in a church? You finally gave in to your Ned Flanders neighbor who'd been after you to come to his church with him and wouldn't leave you alone until you did, so you did it. You came. And you hear these words from Jesus . . . about casting fire on the earth . . . about dividing a family . . . and well, if that's the kind of God you Christians have . . . now you know why I don't come to church! And why I'm not coming back. I got enough problems in my life without this Jesus fella adding to them. You can have Him.

And maybe you even thought some of that yourself this morning, when you heard these words of Jesus. Oh, you'll be back, but *in spite* of these words of Jesus. Right? We'll just ignore them, tuck them away and just think about *nice* Jesus, friendly Jesus, helpful Jesus. These words are embarrassing. We'd be better off if Luke hadn't included them in his Gospel. Or if they'd been just been *skipped over* by whatever committee it was that selected and assigned readings to Sundays.

But Jesus spoke them, and Luke included them, and like it or not, here we are.

Clearly, Jesus sees and thinks differently than we do. Like when I look at a diamond and think it's pretty nice, but a jeweler looks at it and sees all kinds of imperfections and flaws. In the same way, we may think this world isn't too bad, that it just needs some tweaking. But Jesus **sees a world on fire**. On fire with sin and conflict and rage. A world not progressively getting better, but infected with a cancer that is growing and metastasizing. With false prophets like the ones Jeremiah spoke about, who fill people with false hope by saying: ***All is well! No disaster shall come upon you.*** We like those kinds of prophets. They're popular. They're on TV. They fill arenas. They rake in cash. I want to hear that I'm okay, even though I know I'm not. I want to hear that all I need are some minor adjustments and how to do them, even though I know I need a lot more than that and that whatever I need to do to fix myself I can't - I've tried! And failed spectacularly.

So Jesus doesn't tell us what we want to hear. He isn't a false prophet who blows

smoke at us. He tells it like it is. ***I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!***

Now, it may seem strange to cast fire on an earth that is already on fire! But think of it this way: **Jesus is fighting fire with fire**. That's what firefighters do when there's a wildfire. They use fire to burn up what would fuel the wildfire, but in a controlled way, a controlled burn, they call it, so that without its fuel, the wildfire can be extinguished. Now, they have to be careful with that! If they're careless, they could start their own wildfire.

So how is Jesus going to do this?

Well, in a way, He already has been. Seeing the pain and destruction in the world, seeing people heavy laden and burdened with sins of body and soul, He's been cleansing them, healing them, helping them, restoring them, one little lamb at a time. But more is needed. A world-wide restoration. Which is really what He has come to do. Everything else, all these others things, are little signs, little pointers, to this greater work. So, Jesus goes on to say . . .

I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!

Now this baptism is not the one He received from John in the Jordan, when He was anointed with the Holy Spirit - that's done and past. **This baptism that He's talking about here is His baptism of blood**. He knows it's coming, and soon, and He is distressed at all the sin and evil in the world and what it is doing to His people. He must fight fire with fire, but not by burning the world down, but by His cross, where the fire of God's wrath against our sin will consume Him. He's the controlled burn! That by consuming Him, He help us, rescue us, from the wildfire of sin. And how ***greatly distressed He is until it is accomplished***, until it is finished, until He can say *tetelestai*, it is finished, from the cross.

This is what Jesus has come to do, not just be an example and tell us what to do and how to do it - as if we could. He didn't ***come to give peace on earth***, but to fight fire with fire. Now, peace is one of the *results* of His work - peace in the forgiveness of our sins; peace with God and with one another. But what will *also* happen is that the fire line of His cross will divide, even families. We will find ourselves on opposite sides of cultural issues, life issues, social issues, faith issues. What God's Word condemns as sin many do not want to be sin. What God's Word tells us is harmful, many think is good. And so rather than repent and be saved from the fires of sin, they remain on the wrong side of the fire line.

And that is distressing *to us*. And can be so distressing that maybe we are tempted to give up God's truth to keep the peace, and especially in our family. And maybe churches do this too, compromise and give up something of God's Word in order to keep the peace in their church families. But if you're on the wrong side of the fire line, you might be okay for now, for a while, and live at peace for a while, but that wildfire isn't stopping. And you're in danger.

And so Jesus has come to cast fire on the earth *to save us*. To save us from the flames of sin. To save us from the flames of hell. To take the fire of God's wrath against our sin on Himself, right there on the cross, so that it consume Him and not us. That the flames of sin, death, and hell be extinguished for us. That we need no longer fear them, but know that we are safe in Jesus.

So if this was the first time you ever stepped foot in church, *maybe this is a good Word to hear!* To consider which side of the fire line you're on, and which side you need to be on. But it's good for us "church veterans" to hear, too. That we not ignore the signs, as Jesus said. And not just the signs in the world, but the signs in your life. For what are you doing? How are you living? What little compromises are you making to God's Word? Are you where you *want* to be? Where you *need* to be?

Thankfully, **Jesus put the fire line here for us**; put His cross here for us in the water of Baptism, in the words of Absolution and of the Gospel, and in the Body and Blood of Jesus. For in those things, those means of grace, is the cross for us. We are baptized into Jesus' **death and resurrection**. The forgiveness **won on the cross** is given in the Absolution and the Gospel. The Body and Blood that **hung on the cross** is given to us here. Here is the fire line to escape the flames of sin and hell. To escape the wrath that is to come. **To live by faith.**

To live like those we heard about again this morning, in the Epistle from Hebrews chapter 11. They, too, lived in a world on fire - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, prophets, and countless others. Some God used to worldly success, some were martyred. But all, looking to their promised Saviour still to come, were saved. God is faithful.

So, too, is He for you. Even though it may seem like all the world's on fire, that your life is on fire, that the Church is dying and evil is on the rise.

But *since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses* - all those who have gone before us, who witness to God's faithfulness - *let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and*

is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Looking to Jesus. If you look at the sin, at the fire, yeah, things are going to look hopeless and desperate, and cause despair. But looking to Jesus we see the fire of God's wrath against sin, but then also His victory over sin, death, and hell in His resurrection. And then there is hope and confidence. In His victory.

So yes, Jesus ***came to cast fire on the earth***, or as we heard God say through the prophet Jeremiah, ***Is not my word like fire . . . and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?*** But that's the fire we need. The fire that saves. The fire that purifies sinful hearts and minds. And the hammer that smashes hard and stoney hearts that they beat once again with the love of God. Now that's not easy! Just read the stories of all those people mentioned earlier and all they went through - sometimes because of their own sin, sometimes because of the sins of others. But how did the fire of God's Word purify them? How did His hammer smash them? Yet how also did God raise them to a new life?

And now you. Maybe you're in the fire phase right now. Maybe you're under the hammer right now. Maybe the fire line of God's work for you is going right through your heart and life! To divide you from a sinful life and wrong belief. But by doing that, to save. It may feel like you're dying! But **Jesus specializes in life from the dead**. It's what He does. It's what He came to do. *For you*. Even if it means a little fire and hammer right now, that in the end, you live.

Which we are singing in **the Gradual** right now. I don't know if you ever pay attention to those words when we sing them, but here's what we sang today: ***Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.*** Or as Luther would put it: *Those whom God would life up He first casts down. Those He forgives He first convicts. Those to whom He gives life He first kills.* Not because He enjoys doing those things, but because He must. That we stop going on our own way and trying to do it our way, and follow His way. The way of death and resurrection, not self-improvement. The way of repentance and forgiveness, not self-acceptance. Looking to Jesus, not to ourselves. Looking to serve, not insisting on being served. And to love - not because others are so lovable! But because they're not. Like us. But to love in the way of Jesus, as one of our hymns says, *Love to the loveless shown that they may lovely be* (LSB #430 v. 1). That there be ***a great cloud of witnesses***, attesting to God's faithfulness and love.

And yeah, *they're here*. A great cloud of witnesses. And not just unseen, **but in your seat**. You're part of it, too! Your Saviour working in your life, and I rejoice in how He is faithfully using each of you to help others in their lives - Christ in you serving, encouraging, loving, laying down your life for them living a new life. Not perfectly, to

be sure! We're not there yet! But we will be. In Jesus. And then, no more fire, no more hammers, just life. Just Jesus. Just peace and rest.

And whether this is your first time in a church or you're here every week, that's the message, the hope, the life we need to hear. And that in Jesus, we have.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.