

“I Came to Bring Fire to the Earth”

I. Backpacking

A. One of my favorite summer projects over the past 10 years has been back-packing in the High Sierras of Yosemite National Park. I've had to put it aside the past few years but it is still bright in recent memory.

1. It would all begin after Christmas with careful planning, pouring over trail maps, for a 7 day itinerary in the mountains;
2. then, gathering our usual group of up to 10 young people and parents;
3. getting a wilderness permit in February, and committing to regular exercise to be in shape by summer;
4. planning and purchasing food,\ clothes,\ and equipment;
5. finding a way to beat the competition for a campsite in late July at Tuolumne Meadows so we could acclimate for 4-5 days at high altitude and ready our supplies;
6. then, the day finally came when we put on our 50+ pound packs and started out for a physical workout that stretched our physical limits sometimes beyond what we thought we could do.

B. Some people would wonder if we were completely nuts to go through such difficulties so we could leave the conveniences of civilization behind,\ carry 7 days of supplies on our backs,\ and expose ourselves to sun,\ rain,\ mosquitoes,\ bears,\ and cold nights.

1. Well, it's hard to explain,\ but the experiences were always some of the most wonderful and transforming events of the year, and our lives.
2. The young people of course physically able to handle this better than we older parents,\ but for all of us it gave memories for a life time,\ and a relationship with the beauty of the natural world in a way that cannot be appreciated any other way.
3. You can read the writings of John Muir to see what I mean.
 - a. One of his quotes, *“The mountains are calling and I must go.”*
 - b. My son gave that to me as a bumper sticker which I have on my car.

II. Disruption of the Status Quo

- A. My backpacking experiences help me picture, maybe just slightly, Jesus' astounding description of the baptism of fire that he is about to voluntarily accept.
1. There are many ways you might be able to identify with this difficult passage,
 - a. experiences of very difficult times of life you may have encountered, either by choice or by seemingly unavoidable fate.
 2. But we wonder, -- how do we get from the angelic choirs announcing "*Peace on Earth*" at the opening of Luke's gospel with the birth of Jesus, --
 - a. to this, an excruciating description of division (in ch. 12) that he announces will divide all facets of society down to the basic core of the family? -----
 3. If you have been following the story line of Luke's gospel through the summer you will remember that there is a dramatic turning point in ch. 9:51.
 - a. There Luke says, Jesus "*set his face to go to Jerusalem.*"
 - b. That is the over-riding theme of the narrative from that point on, out to the passion of the cross.
- B. We can look at a few passages leading up to this one today to help begin to understand what is going on here.
1. In his home town of Nazareth when Jesus announces his mission and recounts examples of Israel's intransigence and God's mercy to foreigners, he immediately becomes an outsider.
 - a. The people at the synagogue that day were filled with rage and wanted to throw him off a cliff (4:28-30).
 2. Once when Jesus was speaking, his mother and brothers tried to get to him but they couldn't because of the large crowds.
 - a. When he was told they wanted to see him he said, "*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it*" (8:21).
 - b. He is speaking of a very real community that transcends our families of origin.
 - c. This is something we hear of in the famous passage from Hebrews, speaking about the community of saints and the great cloud of witnesses.
 3. A ministry that reconciles long standing enemies will inevitably rend relationships that depend on the old status quo.

- a. We see this in a nutshell in the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32).
- b. When the father is reconciled to his long estranged younger son, there is division between the father and the elder son.
 - (1. He is jealous of his father's mercy given to the perceived undeserving brother.
- c. The parable describes a new order: how those whom we believe are undeserving, receive the abundant grace promised to all.
- d. The fact is, no one expects to see their enemies in heaven.
- e. We are typically consumed by jealousy, anger, desire for revenge, and resistance to change.
- f. We become antagonists against those whom Jesus welcomes.
- g. So it is that Jesus' mission of compassion, mercy, and justice inevitably shatters the status quo of our social realities.
 - (1. It shatters the values that seek a social harmony favoring the powerful at the expense of those who are powerless and expendable. ----
- 4. Once Jesus and his disciples encountered a village of Samaritans who would not receive him.
 - a. James and John wanted to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them.
 - b. But Jesus turned and rebuked them (9:52-56).
 - c. The fire Jesus describes in the passage we heard today is not a holocaust, vindictively imposed as James and John imagined and as some have tried to interpret this passage.
 - d. Rather it is a fire Jesus takes upon himself, a "*baptism of fire*."
 - (1. About this he says he is "*stressed*," because it entails his own passion, voluntarily endured.
 - e. It is the transforming fire of adversity, a fire of cleansing.
 - (1. We might liken it to the fire of the burning bush that Moses encountered.
 - (2. When you have an encounter with the living God it is not something you can simply observe intellectually.
 - (3. It appears first as a fire of judgment - burning out the dross of our lives, but ultimately it is a transforming fire that purifies. ----
- 5. Jesus said, "*It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom*," --- but the cost of that giving is Jesus' own self-giving.

- a. The fire that Jesus casts upon the earth is the fire that he first embraced himself. ---
- b. God's first call is always to God's own, \ not to some bad guys, \ or an evil world out there.
- c. God's first call for holiness and righteousness is also made to those of us who claim to follow the way of Jesus. ---
- d. After we hear and struggle with this call, \ we may then have something to say, \ and something to show to a world definitely needing to clean up it's act.

III. The Transforming Way of the Cross

A. For the world to see Jesus today, it must look at us, the continuing Body of Christ.

- 1. Our mission and calling to be the Body of Christ is to carry out the work and ministry of Jesus in this place, \ in our generation, \ naming the hard realities of our time.
 - a. Our theology of the Incarnation says to us that Jesus inhabits the reality of our world, \ without reservation, \ even unto death.
 - b. To be Christ in the world then means, \ to accept full reality as it is, \ to live into it, \ not work around it or ignore it. ---
 - (1. That will always be a kind of crucifixion both for God and ourselves.
 - (2. This is not a negative message, that we should just "*suffer more.*"
 - (3. That would miss the earth-shattering proclamation that suffering makes about the very nature of God and those who love God. ----- (Eager to Love, Richard Rohr, p. 26)
- 2. In this text, Jesus chastises the crowd as hypocrites for their inability, \ actually their knowing refusal, \ to interpret the harbingers of God's kingdom among themselves.
 - a. What would he say to us in our time?
 - b. For us, the way to be truth tellers, \ the way of accepting the reality of the world as it is, \ and naming it, \ as did Jesus will provoke fire and suffering.
 - (1. It will mean a sure death to easy opinions,
 - (2. to our forced certitudes, and futile attempts to be in perfect control.
 - (3. It will mean death to illusions of a pre-planned life,
 - (4. of any intellectual or moral superiority.
 - c. Jesus on the cross says that God is somehow *in* and *with* all these dyings.

- d. The mystery of the Cross & Resurrection tells us that this will be a transformation for us.
- (1. It will be a trusting that stretches us to our limits many times, just as it did Jesus.
 - (2. In that transformation we will discover the kind of community Jesus spoke of and which the writer of the book of Hebrews referred to as the community of saints, and the Great Cloud of Witnesses.