

FIRE FROM HEAVEN

LUKE 9:51-56
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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JULY 19, 2015/8TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

We are in the third week of our summer series on “the footsteps of Jesus,” where we pay special attention to the things that Jesus *does*.

As we will see throughout the summer, this exercise very often shows us a Jesus who turns expectations of how a Messiah is supposed to operate upside down.

Context is important no matter what passage of Scripture we’re reading, but it’s really important for today’s text. So often, passages from the NT are working implicitly or explicitly with passages from the OT, and this is particularly true today.

So we’re going to spend a bit of time walking through Scripture to begin with today. If you have your bibles, you’re welcome to follow along.

Let’s set the scene for this morning’s text.

Jesus has come down from the mountain of Transfiguration where we have this hugely symbolic scene of Jesus, Peter, James, and John being mysteriously joined by Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the Prophets).

They hear a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” And then, Moses and Elijah disappear and Jesus is alone with his disciples.

Why is this important?

Because the transfiguration clearly shows us that Jesus has *taken the place* of Moses and Elijah, that Jesus is now the final, definitive prophet in Israel. The Transfiguration

demonstrates that God was speaking in an **utterly unique** and **unprecedented** way through Jesus—that all of Israel’s history to this point culminated in Jesus, and everything that would come after would be changed because of him.

Listen to him, the voice from heaven says. More than Moses, more than Elijah, more than any other voice... *Listen to him*.

Okay, so only a few short verses after this hugely significant scene in Luke’s gospel, we arrive at our text today.

Jesus has predicted his death on several occasions already (Luke 9:21-22; 44). And our text begins with these words: “As the time approached for him to be taken up (into heaven), Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”

This is a decisive point in the story. In turning toward Jerusalem, Jesus is heading straight into the eye of the storm.

The people know this. They know that Jesus has ticked off the Jewish religious authorities, and that these authorities are based in Jerusalem. Jesus himself has said that he will be “rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law” (Luke 9:22).

So, the people know that going to Jerusalem is not a great idea. They don’t want Jesus to be rejected.

Jesus sends out messengers ahead of him to a Samaritan village to “get things ready for him.” Verse 53 says, “The people there did not welcome him because he was heading for Jerusalem.”

Was their rejection of Jesus based on ethnicity (Jews and Samaritans didn’t get along)? Or, perhaps, was it because they didn’t want Jesus to head toward rejection? We’re not told. We’re simply told that they would not welcome him.

And this makes James and John angry.

“Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?”

Why would the disciples say such a thing?

Well, this is where we get back to Elijah. Many considered Jesus to be a prophet *like Elijah*.

In Luke 9, Jesus asks his disciples who the people say that he is. What is their response? Some say John the Baptist... Some say *Elijah*...

Elijah was this massive figure in Israel's history, a prophet who had been taken up into heaven without dying (2 Kings 2) and who many believed would come again as part of how the reign of God was ushered in.

Malachi 4:5 says "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes"

So, Elijah was a very prominent figure in first century Jewish understanding.

And, one particular story about Elijah seems to be on James and John's mind here.

In 2 Kings 1, the Israelite King Ahaziah has an accident. He falls through the roof of his house in Samaria and he decides to send his *messengers* to consult a foreign God to see if he would recover from his injuries.

An angel of the Lord dispatches Elijah the prophet to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria with a rather unpleasant prediction.

This is what the Lord says: Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!

King Ahaziah, understandably, isn't thrilled with this news and decides to send a company of men to forcibly bring Elijah to him. So, they go up to the hill where Elijah is sitting and say, "Man of God, the king says, 'Come down!'"

Elijah responds by saying, in a sense, "you say I'm a man of God, do you? Well, if I'm a man of God, may fire come from heaven and destroy you and your fifty men!"

And that's exactly what happens.

The king responds, predictably, by sending *another* fifty men with the same message. And the scene repeats itself. They, too, are consumed with fire from heaven.

The king sends *yet another* fifty men.

This time, the captain decides that perhaps a different strategy would be worth trying. He decides to ask nicely and gets down on his knees and pleads with Elijah to have respect for his life and the life of his men.

Elijah responds by agreeing and going down to the king. He doesn't change his message, mind you, and the king still dies on his bed. And just like that, the story is over.

It's a nice, tidy story right? God vindicates the good guys and gets revenge on that nasty king who didn't come to him first and went chasing after other gods for predictions about his future.

This is how God deals with rejection! Fire from heaven for the bad guys! This is what prophets do when they or God aren't properly received or honoured!

Right?!

One small problem. Jesus doesn't seem to agree.

He doesn't say, "Yeah, good point James, John. You guys know your Scripture pretty well! I'm impressed. It's time to flex a bit of muscle and put these godless Samaritans in their place, prove my authority."

Jesus doesn't say any of that.

Instead, he rebukes them.

We don't know what Jesus said. We don't know *how* he rebuked them or whether he explained the reasons for his rebuke.

We simply know that he rejects James' and John's desire to call down divine vengeance as unworthy of the kingdom of God that he is proclaiming.

So, our text tells the story of Jesus *rebuking* his disciples for their instinctive desire to see fire from heaven on their enemies.

And for most of history, human beings have ignored this rebuke.

The story of world history could, in many ways, be read as a story of this or that group believing that they are acting on behalf of God and that their enemies are the enemies of God.

Virtually every large-scale conflict our planet has ever seen has operated with this assumption. Both sides believe that God is on their side, and that God is against their enemies.

From the ancient Israelites marching into Canaan to the exploits of the Babylonians and Persians and Assyrians and Romans... to the Jewish revolts against Rome.... to the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and his march across Europe... to Muslims conquering the Holy Land in the early middle ages... to Christians marching off to take back the Holy Land in the Crusades... to the Muslim conquering of parts of southern Europe in the 16th century... to the Protestant/Catholic wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries... to the World Wars of the twentieth century... to Korea to Vietnam... to the Cold War... to the Gulf War... to 9/11... to the invasion of Afghanistan... to conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims... to ISIS... to the **countless other conflicts that are far too numerous to even mention...**

Human beings have always been eager to identify *their* enemies as *God's* enemies. And human beings have always been eager to see their enemies on the other end of fire from heaven.

And, of course, we have only to glance at our newspapers to see that this is not a phenomenon of distant history but a present reality, too.

This has always been the way of the world. Respond to your enemies with violence, and claim that God is blessing you and judging them.

Ah, but we're peace-loving Mennonites, right?

We have always been against violence of all kinds. We have been one of the most consistent Christian voices for at least *trying* to take Jesus' words about turning the other cheek and loving our enemies seriously, right?

But I wonder.

We may not be prone to marching off to war, or confusing the kingdom of God with the kingdoms of men, but do we, too, sometimes have a desire to see a bit of fire from heaven on our enemies?

Both the US and Canadian Mennonite conferences are currently plagued by a rancorous and divisive disagreement about same sex marriage. At times, the rhetoric can betray the same impulse that is at work in the desire from James and John for judgment on the Samaritan village.

Anyone brave enough to venture in to the world of social media to observe Christian dialogue about controversial issues will quite quickly see this same tendency at work—the tendency to equate those who read the Bible differently, those who arrive at different theological conclusions than I do, the ones who worship differently, etc., as the enemies of God.

I do spend time online (brave or stupid?) and I have read accusations of unfaithfulness to God and to Scripture, charges of heresy, implications that those who don't agree with this or that opinion are unspiritual or stupid or worse.

We, too, can quite easily portray our own theological enemies as the enemies of God. We, too, can secretly wish for a bit of metaphorical fire from heaven to prove that God's on our side and not theirs.

And we, too, can quite comfortably assume that God is pleased by our efforts at gatekeeping.

The point is, James and John are displaying a very basic human instinct here. Indeed, they could easily be forgiven for their expectations of Jesus given the tradition they were a part of, with the stories of Elijah whirring around in their minds with tantalizing ideas about how prophets of God operate.

And to this most basic of human instincts, Jesus says, simply: No.

Whether we're talking about physical wars and physical enemies, or ideological wars with ideological enemies, Jesus's response to James and John in today's passage holds a mirror up to all of us.

Jesus rebukes our tribalistic tendencies to assume that God is on *our* side and *not theirs*.

Jesus rebukes our instinctive desire to see those who are *not us* or those who *reject us* suffer judgment.

Jesus rebukes our tendencies to want to elevate ourselves at the expense of others, to equate *our views, our tribe, our ethnicity, our religion* with God, and to rub our hands with glee while we wait for God to prove that we're his favourites and we're right

(It's interesting that the story immediately preceding this one in Luke 9 is the one where Jesus' disciples get into an argument about who is the greatest among them. The desire for "fire from heaven" on our enemies so often tells us more about *ourselves* than it does about our enemies.)

Having said that, none of this means that there is no such thing as judgment or that Jesus is advocating some kind of bland tolerance where we all affirm each and every human behaviour and belief as somehow valid simply because someone thinks that this is so.

This is a very popular opinion in our culture, but Jesus is not saying that here.

He makes it clear only a few verses later in Luke 10, when he sends out the seventy-two that those who refuse to welcome Jesus' followers will one day face the judgment of God.

Additionally, the story of Scripture in general makes it quite clear that God *will* judge.

And this is good. Sometimes our desire for fire from heaven is justified. Who among us *doesn't* want to see evil judged? Who among us *doesn't* long for God's kingdom of peace to be ushered in with the elimination of all that is false and degrading and dehumanizing and violent?

We are perfectly justified, I think, in longing for that day when God will right all wrongs and judge all evil (including the evil within us!).

But Jesus is clear that God is the judge and we are not. Jesus is clear that this kingdom comes in ways that we might not expect.

The kingdom of God is not about a tribalistic God coming to save his people and to vanquish all of their enemies with a show of force; it is, rather about a God who comes in Christ to fling wide open the gates of grace and mercy, to welcome all in, and to *lay down his life for both his friends and his enemies*.

This is good news.

It is good news because tribalistic vengeance doesn't actually tend to work very well. See world history.

It is also good news because we human beings are not very reliable judges when it comes to deciding whom God's friends and who God's enemies are. More often than not "God's enemies" end up being "my enemies."

Most importantly, though, I think it is good news because Jesus reveals a crucially important aspect of the nature of God—something that goes far beyond anything Moses or Elijah ever fully understood or reflected to their people.

In Jesus, we do not see a tribalistic God who lashes out in vengeance at those who reject him.

What we see, instead, is Jesus keeping his face turned toward those who rejected him.

We see Jesus "setting his face to Jerusalem," where he would suffer and die for those who wanted nothing to do with him.

We see Jesus praying for those who are killing him because they don't know what they are doing.

We see the post-resurrection Jesus reappearing to doubting disciples and those who betrayed him. We see Jesus stubbornly persisting in his offer of new life to all.

We see a God who takes all of our tribalistic tendencies, all of our hunger for judgment, all of our lust for fire from heaven, and carries it in the form of a cross up a hill, and exposes it.

We see a God who says:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’
But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:43-45).

This is our God.

May we be his children.

Amen.

