



Sermon Series: “A Visit to the Good Physician”

“Three Teachings of Jesus”

Preaching Text: Luke 12:49-56

18 August 2013: 13th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC of Arlington, Texas 76011

My guess is that Cairo, Egypt bears some resemblance to the goings on outside our sanctuary doors this morning as we worship. Of course, in Egypt we have what yesterday’s *Wall Street Journal* trumpeted in its headline: “U.S. Treads Lightly as Crisis Deepens.” And there is the crux of the matter—in a crisis people talk and act differently than they do in more commonplace and routine times.

The question we put to this text is simply **why does Jesus talk this way?** Our answer may help us understand the day’s lesson:

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time (Luke 12:49-56)?

From this biblical text, we have a crisis on our hands—or so it seems. This just in from Victor H. Mair (Professor of Chinese Language and Literature, University of Pennsylvania): “There is a widespread public misperception . . . that the Chinese word for ‘crisis’ is composed of elements that signify ‘danger’ and ‘opportunity.’” Dr. Mair writes this Chinese construction is just not so. I wish I knew Chinese so as to explain this linguistic slipup, but for the record it was an error made by both John Kennedy and Richard Nixon in one stump speech or another. Many others have made the mistake as well.

Words, as harsh as these, of Jesus are usually words spoken in a time of crisis.



We all know that a crisis is a time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger. It is also a moment in which folks must make an important decision. The Bible is full of such stories and here Jesus' words allude to some of those traditions.

In the previous story Luke tells, Jesus contrasts the prudent slave with an unfaithful slave—and guess which has an ill-fated shock when the master arrives home early? This little parable ends with this familiar verdict: **“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded”** (Luke 12:48).

In today's lesson Luke's Jesus offers several sayings and begins with the image of “fire.” Fire is often a biblical icon for purification and separation of the godly from the ungodly. Another saying alludes to Jesus' stress and “his cup.” We remember that in Mark, Jesus asks: **“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with (10:38)?”** This is the notion of “baptism” we see in verse 50. Luke seems to say that Jesus is under great “stress” until God completes his “baptism” suffering, death, and resurrection. Verse 51-53 offers another saying. Jesus divides godly from ungodly people. The third saying occurs in verses 54-56. Jesus suggests that the “crowds” can “deduce” signs of looming weather, but they cannot read the obvious signs in the “present.” This will spell their demise and signals the end of the period of human time.

Ecclesiastes tells us that **“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted . . .”** Thus, although we often think of Jesus saying things like “love one another” and “let the little ones come to me,” truthfully here, Jesus warns of a coming crisis by the intensity of his words. Perhaps you have heard the saying, “Sometimes you're the windshield; sometimes you're the bug” (Mark Knopfler). Sometimes Jesus motivates by using a carrot and sometimes a stick.

However we look at this, we see that Jesus is a prophet and prophets preform



best in a crisis—when people are more likely to hear what they have to say. One thing that prophets do best is create division. Prophets also speak about the “doctrine of the last things” or eschatology. A devastating mistake we often make in apocalyptic thinking/literature is assuming it is the “norm” of scripture. It is not. It serves a theological purpose that we need to keep in mind, but it is not the only way of viewing faith simply because it is not that in Scripture. But here, Jesus is saying that there are signs that people need to make decisions about life and the life to come. In other words are they in or out.

There are two kinds of people in our lives. Those to whom everything is a drama and so a crisis and those to whom nothing is dramatic and thus never a crisis. The truth is sometimes we do have a crisis—and Jesus alludes to this.

We ask: **why does Jesus talk this way?** We could answer because Jesus sees his time and coming as creating a crisis in which God warns God’s people about things to soon unfold. And God asks for people to decide how to face this uncertain future. In other words, amid all expectations, Jesus returns to emphasize that God’s people were to be faithful even amidst the crises of Roman dominance and the dominant evil around them. Do you hear the word?

When I was serving a little church in Corsicana, TX a church member had a relative who died. I assisted with the funeral to support the family. The funeral was in a little, hot, crowded, non-denominational church in East Texas (not Carthage). Since I was untested in the ministry and had never spent much time in East Texas I was in for a new experience. I had never seen anything like this funeral. They wheeled the coffin in to begin the funeral. I got up and read some scripture and offered the pastoral prayer and sat down. My part lasted all of five minutes. Then the lay country preacher began to preach.

He screamed; he metaphorically smoked; he waved his arms; he ranted and raved. He also preached for over an hour and must have quoted no fewer than



thirty scriptures—most of which were from Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation. He kept screaming, “It’s too late for Joe,” he yelled over and over again. “He might have wanted to do this or that in life, but it’s too late for him now. He’s dead. It’s all over for him. He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can’t now. It’s over.” What a comfort this must be to the family, I thought while trying not to wiggle and squirm too much sitting directly behind the pulpit.

I was also quite intent on not being hit by the preacher’s thrashing arms. “But it ain’t too late for you! People drop dead every day. So why wait? Now is the day for decision. Now is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus!”

His altar call lasted a good ten minutes by itself. Well, it was one of the most disturbing things I had ever heard. “Can you imagine a preacher doing that kind of thing to a grieving family?” I asked my friend and church member on the drive back to Corsicana. “I’ve never heard anything so tyrannical, sordid, and inappropriate. I would never have the gall to preach a funeral sermon like that,” I said. My friend agreed. He agreed it was in bad taste, manipulative, and even cold-blooded.

“Of course,” he added, “the worst part of all is that what he said was true.”

David Mosser, FUMC, Arlington, TX 76011