

**ISAIAH 5:1-7 (p. 556)**

**AUGUST 7, 2022**

**LUKE 12:49-56 (p. 846)**

**BLAINE**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

Open the Eyes of our Hearts Lord, the Ears of our Souls, and our Earthly Minds, because we get so caught up in the daily grind! Give us an Eternal Perspective Lord, so that we will see you moving in our world and hear your Whispered Word speaking to our lives! Un-harden our hearts and un-clutter our minds as we study together today. And fill us with your Holy Spirit even now. For we ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

**“JUDGMENT DAY”**

I think it was in a sermon, but I'm not sure. There were a number of Scholarly Articles, speaking on the Health Benefits of consistent Worship attendance. So, maybe consider this an Infomercial. The first was an article from the prestigious “Journal of Behavioral Medicine”. It cited an Evans County Cardiovascular Epidemiologic Study, which said, and I quote, “Blood pressure levels were examined with regards to Church attendance patterns. And a consistent finding of lower Systolic and Diastolic blood pressure was found among frequent Church attendees.” That's Good News, right?

The next was a paper by a Dr. James C. Patterson, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, and Director of Emergency Psychiatry at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center. His research found that attending Church, one or more times a week, dramatically increased life expectancy, on average, by over 7.5 years. He even quoted Proverbs 3 in the paper; “My child, never forget the things I have taught you. Store my commands in your heart. If you do this, you will live many years, and your life will be satisfying”.

Then there was a 2016 study from JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association. It monitored 76,000 female nurses over a 20-year period-of-time. At the end of the study, more than 13,000 of them had died. But the research found that, “The women who went to religious services more than once a week, were 33 percent less likely to be in that group who died, compared to those who never Worshipped”.

Tyler Vander Weele, a researcher at Harvard’s School of Public Health, who co-wrote the paper, pointed out that the benefits diminished as Worship attendance decreased. “Those who attended services only once a week, saw their odds of dying go down 26 percent. Whereas, for those who attended less than weekly, the odds of dying decreased only 13 percent.” That article, by-the-way, was quoted in “Fitness Magazine”, “The Washington Post”, and “The New York Times”, not exactly bastions of religious conservatism!

Another study, in 2017, by Professor Marino Bruce, Associate Director of the Center for Research on Men’s Health at Vanderbilt University, found that “middle-aged adults—both men and women—who attend Church, or other Houses of Worship, reduce their risk for mortality by 55 percent.” He co-authored his study with ten other Professors, including Keith Norris, Professor of Medicine at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA! Their data was based on something called “Allostatic Load”. It’s a set of physiological measurements of blood pressure, cholesterol, high-density lipoprotein ratio, homocysteine, C-reactive protein levels, albumin and such, all way above my pay-grade!

But can you imagine, reducing your risk of mortality by 55%? Oh, don't get me wrong, the death-rate for Christians is still 100%. There is no way to get out of this world alive. But you may be able to postpone your departure date a bit. Study after study shows that regular, consistent Worship lowers depression and suicide rates, increases life-expectancy, helps with sleep and mood, you sex-life, increases grades in school, time-management, boosts your immune system, and lowers blood pressure!

So, tell me, now that you are here, all cozy and calm, stress-free, relaxed, with your hypertension levels at an all-time low—SIGH—how does it make you feel to hear Jesus, scream “Fire”? “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! Do you think I came to bring peace on the earth! No! I tell you! I came to bring division!” I came to bring FIRE, says the Lord! And how I wish it were already kindled!

Did you know that screaming “fire” in a public place, like a movie theatre, is actually illegal? And for good reason! If you yell “fire”, you might cause a panic! Pandemonium could ensue! People could actually trample one another trying to get away! They might scatter in all the wrong directions, not really knowing the way to safety, or not really listening to those who do! Fire is serious business! Just the mention of it demands immediate attention! When you hear the word “fire” you need to move, and move now, take action immediately, right! So, do you think those living in Jerusalem—especially the religious elite—jumped, when they heard Jesus, scream “Fire”?

Jesus is offering a clear warning! Can't you see what's happening around you? Open your eyes! Look around! Look at your nation! Look at your world! Look at your own heart! Jesus warns about the wrath to come! But so does the Prophet Isaiah. I created a beautiful vineyard! I planted it with the choicest vines. I have given you everything you need in order to thrive! But all I get in return is rotten fruit! What more could I have done for you? Yet all I see is violence and bloodshed! All I hear are cries of distress! There is no justice, no righteous hearts! Repent or Perish! That's actually the theme of what Jesus shares next. You can't be complacent. Christianity is not a spectator sport!

Up to this point, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has hammered on His Followers, with one demand after another! Every time He speaks, it seems as if He is raising the bar! Love your Enemies! Bear Good Fruit! Build Wisely! Be a Lamp on a Stand! Sow Seeds, in All Kinds of Soil! And make sure that you, yourself, are Soil that is Receptive to that Seed!

Ever since the Transfiguration really, Jesus keeps talking about heading to Jerusalem, and what awaits Him there. But in addition to that, He is constantly talking about "the cost" for us, if we decide to follow! Our Lord has warned everyone to get ready for the Advent of the Son of Man! He has chastised all of us for being ignorant in reading the Signs of the Times!

Two local tragedies even took place, and when they were reported to Jesus, He interpreted them as a warning for us to repent! That Barren Fig Tree, remember, the one without fruit, was granted more time to escape destruction!

We are clearly living in a time of crisis folks! Or at least they were, right, those other people, way back then! This couldn't possibly apply to us! Crisis demands change! Radically disrupted lives! Fire, right? No way that pertains to us!

You probably remember from your Bible Studies that First Century Israel was a turbulent place. In fact, it still is today. So is most of our world right though, including right here at home! People were at odds with one another, back then. The Gentiles hated the Jews. And the Jews hated the Gentiles! But insert the words Democrats and Republicans, progressive and conservative, young and old, rich and poor, urban and rural! Foreigners, back then, immigrants, were treated with outright disdain! And the locals, those living in the country, were forced into tiered social structures, the "haves" and the "have nots", socio-economic hierarchies really, which only those at the very top could stand!

Even Believers, the so-called "People of God" were separated from one another. Some by theological differences. Others by various interpretations of Scripture. And still others by chosen styles of Worship. I know, it's probably hard to imagine something like that happening. It seems ridiculous, doesn't it? Those in the north, for instance, the Samaritans, were despised by their cousins in the south, all over the issue of the "proper place" to Worship! It's absurd! Right?

And on-top of all this, those dreaded Roman Occupiers were everywhere! And they ruled the entire known-world, and with an iron fist! Slavery was simply a given. About thirty-five percent of the population, according to historians.

And poverty, about fifty percent of society—along with depression, and stress, and strife, were just expected norms! You can see why the religiously faithful were anxiously watching for Messiah to appear, can't you? Everyone was looking for some kind of release! Freedom! Peace! Longing for redemption! And even though believers were pretty much divided on everything else, they did agree on one thing. Times were so bad, that only Messiah, the Anointed One of God, could to straighten it out.

But even here there were divisions. Again, can you imagine? The more “this-worldly” minded were looking for Messiah to come as a Conquering King. Their study of the Prophets led them to expect a military and political leader to come and ease the troubles of Israel, to restore them to their rightful place as a leading nation in the world. Most thought Messiah would come with a sword, slaughtering the foreign dictators, and chasing them all the way back to Rome.

They believed “Christ the King” meant just that, a ruler who would sit on David's throne and restore tranquility and peace! They longed for safety and security! They desired order and calm! To which Jesus screamed “Fire”! He talked about their homes, the homes of believers being wrecked, and Christian families split apart! Children turning against their parents! Fathers and sons, mothers and daughters at each other's throats! Because of me, says the Lord, trouble, and strife, and distress are coming, and coming soon! And how I wish it were already here! But follow me anyway! Take your Faith seriously! Stand up for what you believe, even with those who are closest to you, even if it causes conflict!

Then there were those on the other side of the Messianic Spectrum, the more “other-worldly” minded. They waited in anticipation for Messiah to come and just end it all! They believed the world was at a hopeless stage. They had given up on making things good and right here on earth. And quite frankly, they thought God had too! So, these folks watched diligently for the promised “new heaven and new earth”. They were looking forward to the separation of the sheep and the goats at the final trumpet! They expected Judgment Day, and soon, longed for the final accounting!

These people wanted the division of those who would have eternal bliss from those who would live in eternal damnation! They wanted to hear Jesus, scream “fire”! At least for those “other people”. And you know, there are still a lot of people in that camp today! But what they heard Jesus say is, “The time has not yet come! I have a baptism to undergo first. Oh, it will come, of that you can be sure! I am even distressed until it does, until that time is completed. But for right now, you need to wait a little longer, and keep on loving those around you.”

It’s hard to imagine that anybody was very happy with Jesus that day, isn’t it? I think this Sermon of His would have shaken everyone up, don’t you? And again, that’s often what He does today. Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. Or at least it would be, if we are paying attention!

Notice that it doesn't say in Scripture that Jesus came to lower our blood pressure! And it doesn't say that He came to fulfill all of our financial needs, or take care of all of our problems, or make things smooth sailing along the way! Jesus doesn't even say that He has come to make everything good and right in the vineyard again, at least not yet! What He says is that He has come to bring "Fire", to upset our complacent Apple Carts, to shake us up enough, so that we turn to Him and start taking our Faith seriously!

We were warned about this disruptive Jesus fellow, way back in the beginning of Luke's Gospel. When He was presented at the Temple as a baby, Simeon, a righteous and devout Man of Faith, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied that Jesus would be "destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed"! But we heard the opposite too! We listened as the Angels proclaimed to the Shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth! And we heard that portion of the message when the seventy-two evangelists went out and started to share the Good News too. But the "peace" that Jesus is talking about here, is obviously accompanied with, or preceded by, a whole lot of conflict! So how do we marry those opposing images of Peacemaker and Gracious Savior, with that of a Wrath-filled Judge?

Well maybe we don't. Maybe we are not even supposed to try. I know a lot of folks who would just as soon throw out one or the other of those two poles! But maybe these conflicting images are supposed to be held in a sort of dialectic tension? And then, allowed to bounce off one another, again and again!



Maybe these words of Jesus seem odd to us simply because we tend to overstress one aspect of Jesus and His message, at the exclusion of others? Maybe we have stressed peace, but totally ignored distress? Maybe we've presented Jesus as the way to security and blessing, but we have failed to put equal emphasis on Jesus as a source of insecurity, disruption, as demanding, or even commanding?! Now there's a thought you don't hear a lot these days! Jesus commanding obedience! It goes right to the heart of that "Fire" thing, doesn't it? Or maybe, it's just the opposite? Maybe, we are totally missing out on the peace?

Richard Halverson, in a book about the Church and Culture says; "When the Greeks got the Gospel, they turned it into a Philosophy. When the Romans got it, they turned it into a Government. When the Europeans got it, they turned it into a Culture. And when the Americans got it, they turned it into a Business."

What do you think? What have we done with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Is what we've done, the right thing? I mean we sometimes lift up our Churches as places of peace and consolation, where people can find rest in the midst of turbulent lives. Or sometimes advertise them as places of prosperity and blessings, of good fortune to all those who come our way. And sometimes we emphasize "Fire Insurance". Come here for safety, to escape the Flames of Hell! So, do you think our focus is on "eternal things", or simply on the "here and now"? Or do we talk about the "whole package", including the "Fire", and just how important that can be?

I mean, let's be honest, some people are drawn to the Cross by love! Whereas others are driven there by fear! Some people only see the Son as a source of light! Whereas others find Him a source of intense heat! But the truth is, the Cross of Jesus is a multi-dimensional thing. Doesn't "Fire" actually bring both light and heat? Shouldn't we "see the light" as well as "feel the heat"? What if the "Fire" that Jesus speaks into the turbulent First Century world, and into the turbulent Twenty-First Century world as well, is really something more?

I remember in school reading about the Early American Pioneers, and how, when they saw a fire coming across the prairie, they would burn the grass in the area immediately around them. Then they would stand in the middle of the burned-out area, safe and secure. As the roar of the flames approached, they stayed calm, unafraid! Even as an ocean of flames surged past, there was no fear! You see, a preemptive fire had already passed over the place where they stood.

At first brush, that may seem a little odd, or possibly intense. But not when you realize that Smoke Jumpers, forest fire fighters, do something very similar still today. When the wind shifts, and fire threatens their lives, the firefighters scorch the ground around them, crawl under a protective covering and wait, safely, for the raging fire to pass. I want to say that again! When the wind shifts, and fire threatens their lives, they stand in the scorched ground around them, crawl under a protective covering and wait, safely, until the raging fire passes.

Did you know that the word “Atonement” means to “cover over”, to blanket our sins, protecting us from the all-consuming wrath of God? Is it possible then, that Jesus has a different kind of fire in mind—one that purifies and protects? Could it be that the small fires in our lives are actually helpful and good, warning us, scorching the nasty stubble that surrounds our lives, helping us avoid an even bigger fire that is certainly on its way? One that will totally consume everything in its path!

Think about it! If God is Holy, and we’re not—and the fire is coming, just as Jesus promised—wouldn’t it be smart to burn off the dead underbrush and trash, and cover ourselves with something safe, even if it means taking some heat? Doesn’t that make sense?

Consider what little fires do you need to burn in the ground around you, while you wait for the Lord’s return? What nasty stubble needs to be scorched right out of your life, before that all-consuming fire comes roaring by? What atonement, what “cover” are you counting on as a Blanket of Protection? Is it “Fireproof”?

“God planted a vineyard,” says the Prophet Isaiah “with the choicest vines, on a fertile hillside. God cleared the whole area of stones, and even built a watchtower and winepress in the middle of it. And then God waited for a crop of good grapes. However, all that came forth was bad fruit. God looked for justice from His people, but saw only bloodshed. God looked for righteousness in His vineyard, but only heard cries of distress.

Therefore, God removed the hedge of protection from around the field, broke down the walls, enabling it to be overrun. God allowed briars and thorns to spring up and grow, and stopped the clouds from raining upon it! God let His Beloved Vineyard become a wasteland.” Which sounds like prime conditions for a fire, doesn’t it? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

**PASTORAL PRAYER**

Merciful and Almighty God, freer of oppressed people and liberator of slaves, to you we call out in our time of need. To you we call out when we are trapped by life's burdens. To you we cry when we are hemmed-in by fear. And to you, Lord, we come, repentant, when we have done these things to others as well. You are the God of Freedom and Love, as well as the God of Truth and Justice. You are the author of Mercy and Grace, as well as Salvation. And therefore, you are the Prince of Peace.

Lord, we know that we live in a world with so many traps and snares, one in which good things, as well as bad, can easily scoop us up into captivity. We live in a fearful world as well, one in which we sometimes walk with great trepidation. But it is a world which you have created, a fallen world, yet one designed to be good and right. So, Lord, we pray for your Holy Spirit, your powerful Presence here and now, because that alone will make things right. Pour out that Spirit on this world. Pour out Truth and Justice on all your people. Pour out Mercy, Lord, on all those who call on your Name. Grant Health and Healing to those in pain. Grant Wisdom and Guidance to those who are lost. And please Lord, grant Peace, and Security, and Joy, to all those who fear. Empower your people Lord, to live boldly in your Name. Boldly and on Fire!

This morning Lord we lift up our joys and our concerns, thanking you for the Blessings, and setting the burdens down at your feet. We also place before your Altar of Grace Lord some of our loved ones. We lift-up before you..... We also ask Lord, that you place your hand upon this congregation, on this Church which meets in your Name. Lead us and guide us as we strive to discern your will. Help us to faithfully walk in your ways.

We ask for your protection Lord, for you to keep us safe, especially as we are apart from one another. And we ask all this, in the Name of our Risen Lord and Savior, your Son Jesus Christ, as we pray together now the very prayer that He taught us, saying, Our Father...