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“I have come to set the earth on fire” (Luke 12:49).

Eph 3:14-21; Luke 12:49-53

Today’s liturgy pairs one of the most majestic summations of the Christian vision with one of the scariest passages in the Gospels about the challenge of getting there. Ephesians 3:14-21 is an apotheosis that inspired the beautiful song “Dwelling Place” by John Foley of the St. Louis Jesuits, while Luke 12:49-53 is an apocalypse contemplated by James Baldwin for America’s failure to extirpate racism. Whether our world ends with T.S. Eliot’s “bang or a whimper,” there will be an accounting.

Perhaps only art and imagination can apprehend these themes that push history beyond time toward judgment. Jesus offers a harrowing description of the decisiveness that will be required of his disciples that echoes the poetry of the prophets. He tells them, “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing. There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!”

Jesus saw his death as ushering in the Kingdom of God, and he called it a “baptism of fire.” John the Baptist’s had said that the baptism Jesus would bring was not of water but of the “Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). This was fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:1). The disciples must pass through a severe ordeal to follow Jesus. The cost of discipleship will be great, including the surrender of all other loyalties, even family ties.

The first followers of Jesus must have experienced sharp generational divisions, painful splits within families when some members stepped beyond their Jewish faith to embrace Jesus, a controversial figure condemned by the Sanhedrin as a heretic and executed by the State as a dangerous subversive. Luke reminds his church that Jesus had foretold divided households, father against son, mother against daughter, fighting among in laws that would put enormous stress on marriages.

We all have known some kind of baptism of fire in our lives, moments when we had to do something difficult to begin a job or to change jobs, to move to a new place, to make an ethical choice that set us apart or cost us some advantage. Some professions hold life and death consequences, in medicine, the military, law enforcement, or to bring social justice, and service requiring great hardship and sacrifice. To have been on the “front lines” of any challenge is know what Jesus spoke of. He promised his followers the grace to accept such moments, describing them as birth pangs that lead to rebirth and new life.

We cannot always predict when such tests will come or whether we will cross the thresholds that divide our lives into before and after, old and new. Today’s Word invites us to know what is worth living for, or dying for if it comes to that, and to review our priorities so we will always have our eyes on the prize.

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