

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2022 C

A few years ago, we had an early-morning fire at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton School on the 4th of July. Thanks be to God, no one was hurt and all was repaired. But it makes me hear Jesus' words about igniting a blaze a little differently. If Jesus said, "***I have come to set your school on fire,***" should I rejoice at this promise of renewed hope and energy, or should I call law enforcement? Of course we know what He meant, but the point remains: fire can serve us, or threaten us; it can bring warmth and light, or it can destroy.

The same challenge of interpretation arises with Jesus' words about peace and division. He is the one promised by Isaiah as the Prince of Peace, the Savior of Whom St. Paul declares "He is our Peace, Who has broken down the barrier separating us." ***Why does Jesus, Who prays specifically that all may be one, state that He has come for division and speak of His mission as the root of the painful conflicts that so often arise in families and friendships around matters of faith?***

It helps to know that ***Jesus is actually quoting the prophet Micah here***, and that gives us deeper context. Like all the prophets, Micah's message is both warning and promise. It names the problems and injustices that result when we are unfaithful to the covenant, but it also reassures that God will set things right.

Think of the headlines – shootings, scandals, ongoing conflicts in the Ukraine and so many other places, violence and tensions that continue to plague us – and Micah's words from 2800 years ago are as relevant as today: "***Their hands succeed at evil, the powerful speak as they please, the best of them is as a hedge of thorns. Now is the time of your confusion.***" How much confusion there is today! The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis comes alive, not only about human languages but in our worldviews and values and basic ideas that come into such conflict that it seems we cannot understand each other.

But that is only part of the prophet's message. Immediately after these words about divided homes, Micah says: "***But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for God my savior; my God will hear me!***"

Though I have fallen, I will arise; though I sit in darkness, the Lord is my light. Who is a God like you, who removes guilt and pardons sin; Who does not persist in anger forever, but instead delights in mercy, and will again have compassion on us? You will cast into the depths of the sea all our sins; you will show faithfulness as you have sworn to our ancestors from days of old.”

Jesus quotes Micah and fulfills what is foreshadowed in Jeremiah’s sinking in the mud, because He is on His way to Jerusalem to fall and arise, to enter into the darkness of death and the tomb and be drawn forth by the Father’s love into resurrected Light. He is announcing to His hearers that He is the One who will remove guilt and pardon sin, delighting in mercy and compassion; through His Cross, the apparent defeat of His mission, salvation is in fact at hand. *Division will arise, but that is only because not all open their lives to redemption. The weakness is not on God’s side, as though Jesus is not doing enough; it is on the human side, when we are fearful of the fire that desires only to purify our hearts. We can run away, or we run the race before us with our eyes fixed on Him.*

So Scriptures that begin in fire and division are ultimately a message of rebuilding, hope, and mercy ... not just about a school, but about our lives and our future. Still today, fire might be used to clear a field of weeds and overgrowth to ready it for planting. *These words invite us to ask: what does the fire of the Holy Spirit desire to clear away, so that something new and better can begin in my life?*