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St. James', Mt. Airy
8/14/16

Proper 15C
Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

I wonder what your favorite image of Jesus is?

Perhaps it is the One who is called the Good Shepherd, or maybe the Prince of Peace. Do you connect with the One who reconciles a wayward son and a father, or the One who draws a line in the sand beside a prostitute – bringing comfort and healing in an embrace?

What face of Jesus makes you feel safe?

Whatever image comes to mind, today's Gospel is a clear reminder that we can never get too comfortable with our own personal Jesus.

Because as much as we want to pick and choose those pieces of the Jesus story that we like the best or are most comfortable with, the fact remains that we can't escape the Jesus who tells of the sorting of the goats from the sheep, the separation of the wheat from the chaff; who wishes to bring fire to the earth, and proclaims himself as the one who will bring division.

These are not easy images or stories – but they are important – they wake us up, make us pay attention and see things in new ways. And though we might not willingly or readily see it at first glance, they are **good news**.

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Who here has heard of Brené Brown?

I first heard of Brené a few years ago when I watched her TED talks, which are still worth looking up and watching.

She has a PhD in social work, and is a Licensed Master Social Worker; she is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. She has published several books, including the bestsellers *Daring Greatly* and *Rising Strong*. And she has spent the last decade+ studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame.

You know, light coffee hour topics for conversation.

In the course of her research, Brené had to face some truths about herself and her life – which led to what she calls “a little breakdown.” Which was really, a BIG breakdown. She began working with a therapist, and came out of the experience with an understanding that what she had been engaging in was perhaps better called a *spiritual awakening*.

A part of this awakening was her decision to return to church (she’s an Episcopalian!). She went because she was looking for something to help take away the pain, the confusion, the hurt. She wanted safety and comfort. She sought the One whose burden is light, and whose yoke is easy.

Brené said she expected faith and the church to be like an epidural for life.

Instead, what she found is that faith and the church were more like a midwife – someone sitting next to you and saying push.¹

There is pain, but you'll get through it – and God will be with you the whole way. And at the end it won't be in vain, you will hold new life in your hands.

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This image of the midwife is what came to mind as I was reflecting on our Gospel passage this week. Not faith, not Jesus, as an epidural – but as a midwife. Someone who brings comfort, but also does the hard work of pushing us into new life. Perhaps not what we initially want or expect, but what we need. An abiding presence. Sometimes calm, inviting us to match our breaths to him. Sometimes pushy, pushing us to push when that's what's needed. And always a truth-teller – in this life there is pain, but there is also joy; there are breakdowns, but there are also awakenings. New life is always happening.

We fool ourselves when we only expect and look for tame comfort from faith and God. What we are often seeking, like Brené was, is a way to numb ourselves to pain and life and the world. There are plenty of ways we do this in our lives, and looking to the church can be one of them.

¹ http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/jesus-wept?utm_content=bufferb94e9&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=Buffero

But we **are** indeed fooling ourselves when we think that faith will be a tool of numbness, that God wants us blind to ourselves and the world around us, that Jesus will remain a tame version of what we think we want and need.

There is a distinction between numbness and the comfort of abiding presence – of not being alone – and that is what Jesus offers.

And so it is that Jesus came to bring fire.

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There is a difference between fire that cleanses and fire that incinerates.² Jesus intends the former. It's not that pain or suffering are redemptive in and of themselves – they are not – but it is an inescapable truth that they change us, they distil and clarify us, as we push through them. As much as we might like to be numbed to them, that is not what Jesus offers.

What Jesus does offer, and what we can find in churches when churches are being their best selves, is someone to laugh with us – to weep with us – to gigglesnort – mope – get angry – **be everything**, with us. Our burdens are lessened and our joys magnified when the fire of the Spirit alights in our hearts, leading us deep into a life of faith.

And so, strangely enough, to deepen our faith, it is that Jesus came to bring division.

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Here in Luke's Gospel the frame for the division is the household – father against son, mother against daughter.

² *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 3, pg. 361.

In the first century the household was the fundamental building block of society, and so for Jesus to say he came to divide the relationships within it, was for him to declare that he was breaking the social, hierarchical status quo of his day.³

This message is often encountered in both testaments of scripture, and one we might imagine Jesus learned intimately from his mother – after all it was Mary who sang of such reversals in her song, the *Magnificat*:

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Is it not true that we are all too often numb to the status quo of our day? Are there not insidious ways that we are indeed invested in this status quo? Here Jesus calls us out and reminds us that if we are to follow him, we must participate in his missional work of bringing division – we are not meant to be epidurals for the status quo, we are meant to be midwives: assisting in the birth of justice, compassion, and reconciliation.

And so it is that Jesus came: angry, frustrated, scared, and calling names.

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You hypocrites! Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Even if you can pretend not to have heard him talking about fire and division, you can't escape the name calling – it hits too close to home.

³ *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 3, pg. 361.

Because sometimes when the going gets rough, when we've been breathing and pushing and it doesn't seem like we have anything left to give – when we just want the darn epidural already – what we really need is someone to get up in our face and tell us to get over ourselves already, and to just push on through and get it done.

Because we can, and because we're never alone. God abides with us, and when we are part of a community of faith, we abide with one another. Together we encounter Christ and engage the world – birthing the transformation and love found in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

This is our call as followers of Christ, and this is the **good news** to be found today and every day.

~ AMEN ~