

“Fear Not?”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

If a reporter walked around a city with a film crew and asked strangers at random, “Why did Jesus come into the world?” I think we all agree that the most common answer would be, “That’s easy. Jesus came into the world to bring fire upon it and cause division in it.” No? No. But that’s what today’s gospel lesson Luke 12 says. And it’s not particularly uplifting. I mean it’s one thing for Jesus to say, “I came to bring fire to earth” but then he doubles down and says, “and how I wish it were already kindled!”

Then as we are trying to absorb that he taunts us saying, “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.”

Well, that’s just great. Let’s turn to the Old Testament lesson for some possible comfort. Initially, we are encouraged by the first verse from Isaiah 5, “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.”

Ah—it’s a love song. How...lovely. And we hear how this “beloved” one did everything he could to have a wonderful vineyard.

But the smile on our faces drops when we hear that instead of sweet, succulent grapes the vineyard produced what the Hebrew literally says, are “stinky things”.

He then rhetorically asks the people of Jerusalem and Judah to judge between him and his vineyard given everything he did to make it successful.

He then says, “I’ll tell you what I will do” and then describes all things he will do to utterly destroy it: devour it, break down its wall, trampled it

“Fear Not?”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

down, lay waste to it, let briers and thorns consume it, and “command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.”

Whew. I wouldn’t want to be that vineyard.

Then we learn in the last verse, “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting.”

Ah, so it was a metaphor and the message is God is going to destroy his people. Well, that’s almost as comforting as the gospel lesson.

In fact, when I was reading the lectionary my first thought was, “Wow. I have never preached on these passages.” My second thought was, “Wow. I wish I wasn’t preaching on these passages.”

I’ve mentioned before the most common phrase throughout the bible—Old and New Testaments—is “fear not.”

We sometimes translate it as “Don’t be afraid” or “Have no fear”, but in the Hebrew and Greek it is “fear not.”

It means God wants us to be filled with hope and trust and not fear.

God is saying, directly or indirectly, “Don’t be anxious. Trust me, everything will work out. I promise.”

When I read today’s passages I thought, “Fear not? Sounds like the opposite. I’m actually a little depressed now.”

Well, let’s see if we can find the silver lining in today’s gloomy clouds.

First, we are not talking about challenges in our lives, like lost love ones or illness or things that are weighing us down. We are talking about sin—what separates us from God.

To beign, let’s disabuse ourselves of bad popular theology that has done so much to train congregations to hear “I came to bring fire to the earth”

“Fear Not?”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

[Luke 12:49] as a description of a God with an itchy trigger finger who just can't wait to smoke some sinners.

God doesn't want to annihilate sinners—God wants to redeem them. Hence the whole Jesus thing in the first place.

Secondly, yes, fire is sometimes an image for destruction in the bible, but in Luke 3 John the Baptist told us that Jesus is coming with a fire of purification and refinement. Like a fire that burns off the impurities of a metal, the fire Jesus brings burns off the impurities sticking to us.

The fire Jesus wants to kindle is a fire of change, the fire of God's active presence in the world.

It is light that leads to “action.” This fire of love burns away our obsession with self-preservation, our idolization of kinship, and our false sense of control.

But because we mistake those impurities for purity, and because we lie to ourselves that self-protection is a form of justice, we resist Jesus.

Therefore, he also speaks of the division his message brings

Jesus says families will be divided. But it is one thing to say that you have come to destroy families, and another altogether to say that families will likely be destroyed on account of your coming.

Jesus is a sign that divides one's motives and inclinations like a sword, requiring a piercing spiritual discernment. When Mary and Jesus' brothers are rebuffed by Jesus' redefinition of family as “those who hear the word of God and do it” [Luke 8:19-21], the cost of this discernment becomes plain.

We know from the American Civil War that families were divided with some members fighting for the Union and others for the Confederacy.

“Fear Not?”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

And because we didn't truly resolve issues of slavery, racism, and equality they perniciously infect our politics today once again dividing families.

Similar reasons divide Christians today with each side calling the other “betrayers of the faith” and hypocrites.

In today's passage Jesus tells the people they are “hypocrites” because they know how to interpret the signs for the weather but not the present time.

Using the word hypocrite here is a bit odd because a hypocrite is a person who pretends or espouses virtues, moral or religious beliefs, or principles but do not and actually do the opposite.

Here, it is more that they are knowledgeable in the way of the world but not of God.

The hypocrite label might make sense if the hypocrites believe that Jesus brings grace, yet they continue to work under the law to achieve their own righteousness.

Or, we might be hypocrites when we believe that we have a monopoly of truth, about ourselves and our world.

The hypocrite thinks they have everything figured out, but keeps using human actions to guarantee God's presence and remain in control.

Thus, the division of which Jesus speaks is a result of the purifying fire he bears. The kingdom of God he proclaims represents a new order governed not by might but by forgiveness; not by fear but by courage and not by power but by humility

Jesus is born for one thing: to herald the coming kingdom of God, and to establish this kingdom he will raise neither banner nor sword but

“Fear Not?”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

instead hang on the cross, which was the baptism meant that he was under great stress to complete. Those who recognize the signs and choose to follow him will not only need to forsake the trappings of power that adorn the lords of the present kingdom, but can also expect resistance, even opposition.

This is why God was upset in the Isaiah passage. As the end of the last verse today said, “he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

There is a play on words in the Hebrew with “justice” and “bloodshed” sounding very similar and also with “righteousness” and “cry.” Kind of like if we said “he expected equity but saw iniquity.”

The Hebrew word *mishpat* that we translate as “justice” has as a broader range of meanings than the English and corresponds approximately to the idea of social justice.

And the Hebrew word *tsedaqah* that we translate as “righteousness” more often designates the fulfillment of one’s obligations to others.

Colloquially you might say “do right by somebody”.

So, God is upset because the widows, orphans, and the poor are being exploited, the legal system is corrupt, and a select few have unbridled acquisition of wealth and land. Thus, it is not God but the people who have condemn themselves. This is what Jesus echoes.

So, in one sense we should welcome this fire purification to help bring us closer to God. At a minimum, we should repent and perceive “the present time” for what it is, as an available but diminishing opportunity to align ourselves with God’s priorities. That is faith.

“Fear Not?”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

And to end on a high(er) note, the epistle lesson from Hebrews encourages us to keep the faith as our ancestors did before us.

It reminds us that faith is active and demanding. Faith may make us an alien in our own land. Faith can lead to suffering and therefore requires endurance. Faith is not for the faint of heart. Fortunately, we have Jesus to look to as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

So, when our knees are weak and our hands drooping, when we feel worn out in the journey of faith, wondering whether we can hold on and hold out, remember this clarion call from Hebrews to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

So, fear not; keep the faith.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.