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All Saints Episcopal Church, Salt Lake City, UT
The Rev. Diana Johnson
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“I have come to bring fire to the earth....Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” Jesus asks, and then answers, “No, I tell you, but rather division!”

What has happened to the Jesus who greeted his fearful disciples in the Upper Room again and again, saying “Peace be with you.” Is this the same Jesus? The greeting Jesus offered his disciples was a common greeting in the Old Testament world. The Hebrew word is “*shalom*”, which means *not just* the absence of war or conflict. Shalom means wholeness, well-being and health. This is what Jesus wants for us – for *all of us*. In case you haven’t thought about it, *us*, in the context of Jesus teaching, is an *inclusive* word – it doesn’t just mean those of us here this morning, not only us Christians, or us American citizens, or us white people, or us well to do people – it means everybody - wholeness, well-being and health - for everybody.

Next comes a *really* challenging part of this Gospel – Jesus claims to be bringing division – division within families – fathers against sons, mothers-in law against daughters in law – this was significant, as multiple generations lived together in the same household during Jesus time. Division within households meant chaos. Jesus experienced this separation himself as his own family was torn by his ministry. Though Mary would be with him at the cross, the Gospels tell us that ==`there was a time when his family wanted to bring him home because they thought he had gone crazy. Division

among families probably made sense to many of Luke's listeners who may have been estranged from their families because they followed Jesus.

Thirdly, Jesus was promising to bring "fire to the earth". Fire is terrifying – the western U.S. has had more than our share in recent years. We all remember the horrifying images of destruction by the Camp Fire, and others, in California last year. Why would Jesus be saying that he wanted to bring fire to the earth? Fire, in the Bible, is more than its practical uses of heating and cooking. It had an important symbolic meaning that signifies the presence of God – it's a metaphor for God's holiness, for purification, with God as the Divine actor. Jesus wants to kindle a fire - a fire of change and purification - in fact he wishes it was already started! He has an intense desire for the well-being of the world. "Thy Kingdom come, thy Will be done."

A few chapters hence, in chapter 19, Jesus wept as he approached Jerusalem. He asked, "If you had only recognized...the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes" He tearfully predicted the future when "one stone will not be left upon another; because you did not recognize God's presence among you...Then he entered the Temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there." This is a deeply grieving Jesus, an angry Jesus. This is Jesus asking how long must we wait for the Kingdom of God to break forth in its fullness? How long must we wait?

We're still asking this same question today. Division between Americans of differing ideological and political persuasions is more pronounced now than at any time in the

last 20 years. And the anty has been upped – not only do we disagree with others, we demonize those who differ from us. In the words of author Arthur C. Brooks in his book “Love Your Enemies”, we now live in a “culture of contempt”, where we dehumanize those who are different from us, and those who hold different political views, believing they are worthless and an actual threat to our nation’s well-being. According to FBI statistics, hate crimes in the U.S. have increased by 17% since 2016, and 3 in 5 are motivated by race or ethnicity.

Does this look like the Kingdom of God? Does any of this reflect what Jesus taught that it means to be a Christian? In John’s Gospel he said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” You may say, and you may be correct, that the attitudes and actions so prevalent in our country don’t represent you, that you are as appalled as I am at this juncture our nation is in. But, I have a question for you? What do we do about it? Are we – you and I, the church - culpable by our silence? By our niceness? By our fear of conflict? By my reluctance to preach the Gospel because it will be seen as “political”, because we want to stay comfortable and keep Jesus neatly out of our public life.

What would help? Or what would make things worse? I’m not sure that I know. I personally find it more and more difficult to engage, as our life as a nation appears to be spiraling down into more and more disharmony – more killings in the name of ethnic purity, more name calling and dehumanizing people of color, entire cities of color. Too many people, too many of our elected officials, not only ignore it, they justify it. I find it

more and more difficult to read or watch the news. I want to hide my head under a pillow and ignore all that's going on. This is not the country that I know and love, and I'm afraid - afraid for myself, for my family, for my country.

Fr. Steve preached a sermon last week about faith, based on the reading from Hebrews – “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Through faith we believe that good things - hoped for things, things that we can't even imagine - can happen. Steve pointed out that faith and hope are closely related – hope, as it's used in the Bible, is the expectation of a favorable future under God's direction. It is the opposite of despair. This is indeed Good News. But there's more to it than wishing for a good outcome, than prayer that God will do something for us while we sit on the couch and watch the news. You may have heard this story, but it's worth another go:

A fellow was stuck on his rooftop in a flood. He was praying to God for help.

Soon a man in a rowboat came by and the fellow shouted to the man on the roof, "Jump in, I can save you."

The stranded fellow shouted back, "No, it's OK, I'm praying to God and he is going to save me."

So the rowboat went on.

Then a motorboat came by. "The fellow in the motorboat shouted, "Jump in, I can save you."

To this the stranded man said, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and he is going to save me. I have faith."

So the motorboat went on.

Then a helicopter came by and the pilot shouted down, "Grab this rope and I will lift you to safety."

To this the stranded man again replied, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and he is going to save me. I have faith."

So the helicopter reluctantly flew away.

Soon the water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned. He went to Heaven. He finally got his chance to discuss this whole situation with God, at which point he exclaimed, "I had faith in you but you didn't save me, you let me drown. I don't understand why!"

To this God replied, "I sent you a rowboat and a motorboat and a helicopter, what more did you expect?"

Like the man in this story, we must participate. Our prayer must be "*God help us*" not "*God fix it for us.*" If we are Christ's disciples we must be his voice, and hands and feet in the world. If we call ourselves Christians, we must live as Christ lived. We must speak out against oppression, against greed, against dehumanization, against exploitation, against narcissism. For *Christ's* peace – well being for everyone – we must do more than pray for it. We must stand up for it.

The clergy at Washington National Cathedral – America's National Cathedral, the Episcopal Church's National Cathedral - released a letter on July 31, signed by the Bishop of Washington DC, the Dean and other clergy of the Cathedral. It was given rather widespread national attention in the few days following its publication, and several other Christian denominations have issued similar statements. It's too long to read in its entirety now, but I urge you to go to their website and read it. It is entitled and asks the question – "Have We No Decency?". A few of the statements say much – "We have come to accept a level of insult and abuse in our political discourse that violates each person's sacred identity as a child of God. We have come to accept as normal a steady stream of language and accusations coming from the highest office in the land that plays to the racist elements in society....Make no mistake about it, words matter. Violent words lead to violent actions....When does silence become complicity? What will it take for us all to say, with one voice, that we have had enough?" Three days later a shooter, targeting Latinos, killed 22 people and injured 23 others in El Paso, TX.

How long must we wait for the Kingdom of God? What must we do to bring it about?