

“Revolutionary Jesus”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Luke 12:49-56

Gee, where do I start? There’s hardly a ray of sunshine in that whole panorama of scripture. We could start with Isaiah, where God berates the people of Israel for not turning out the way He had hoped. Most of us have probably suffered that treatment from a well-meaning parent or mentor at some point. The portion of Psalm 80 we recited is basically a redux of Isaiah 5.

Then there’s the Book of Hebrews, which is a bit better, except for that cheerful part in the middle about people being tortured and sawn in two. Evidently, that’s a good thing, as long as you’ve got faith. Finally, we get to the Gospel, where Jesus talks about the sword of division he brings. Is this the same guy I preached about a couple of weeks ago, who in a passage from Luke, same chapter as today’s, seemed like a person focused on forgiveness and reconciliation and peace?

The Bible is full of passages like the one we heard read today, and unless you’re fixated on vengeance and judgment and fire-and-brimstone, it can be hard to figure out where to go with these verses. One temptation is to paper them over, or simply ignore them altogether, but that doesn’t do justice to a big hunk of what we embrace as the primary authority for our faith and practice.

Instead of trying to handle all four lessons for this morning, let’s focus on the Gospel, which is probably the most disturbing. We can be honest about how Jesus

appears here. He seems like an angry revolutionary, ready to bust up families and tear the world apart, and actually, he is.

You see, over the years, the core message of Jesus has been domesticated, tamed by a Church and a world that wants a Savior who doesn't meddle much. We want a Jesus who listens to our prayers and answers them in a favorable way on a fairly regular basis. We want a Jesus who makes us feel good, who comforts our hurts, and maybe challenges us to make tough changes, but who on the whole gives more than he asks, and who demands nothing. However, this is not the Jesus of the gospels.

Jesus wants us to make a choice, and not an easy one. He expects commitment that goes beyond any others we have. He speaks of vigilance, the kind that stays up all night if necessary, waiting for the Master's presence to arrive. Jesus brings a message of renewed priorities that shape our perceptions so that our purpose can be seen more clearly and followed more nearly.

This is the type of talk that got him killed. Please dispense with your conspiracy theories about how the Roman ruler of Jerusalem got snookered by a bunch of religious holy-rollers. Yes, the Jewish elite played their part, but nobody gets an empire with leadership that gets played as a patsy by the locals. Jesus was executed on grounds of sedition. The case may have been weak, and the standards of justice poor. Regardless, Jesus was sentenced and executed by an imperial power, Rome. Jesus was more of a threat to them than they probably realized at the time, but obviously they weren't prepared to take chances either.

From before the beginning, when Mary was still pregnant with Jesus, she sang of God, whose Son she bore, "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.” [Luke 1:51b-53] No happy tidings for an empire there.

When Jesus returned from his baptism by John in the Jordan River, his first stop was his hometown synagogue, where he read from the prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” His commentary on the passage was simple: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” [Luke 4:16-30] In other words, Jesus said, “It’s me. I’m the guy you’ve been waiting for to set things straight.” Initially astounded, the crowd quickly realized the import of his words, and set out to kill him.

Then Jesus started playing fast and loose with the Law, upsetting those legalistic law and order types, by healing on the Sabbath and other borderline offences. Shortly after recruiting his disciples, Jesus exorcised a man possessed by a demon that identified itself as Legion, indicating that the poor man was infested with many demons. But let’s not forget that the word legion also indicates the largest formation in the Roman Army, a group of about 6,000 men. This episode in the ministry of Jesus shows clearly the subversive political nature of his work. In casting out the legion of demons, there are undertones of a much more down-to-earth casting out going on.

We could review example after example, not only from Luke’s gospel, but from the other three as well, until it would be very difficult to argue against the idea that Jesus was a revolutionary. He was angry: at the oppression of an occupied people; at the

massive gap between the super-rich and the desperate poor; at the apathy and cynicism and fear that kept people paralyzed and caused them to shun people who were different or who were even suspected of not conforming to what respectable people thought was appropriate behavior.

So when Jesus says he brings a sword to divide and that families will be rent asunder, he's not indulging in florid rhetoric. He means it, because Jesus came to turn the world upside down, and by doing so, turn us toward God, and Jesus knew that there would be people who would resist this, who would have too much to lose, who would fear the challenge to the *status quo* and the challenge to go places they did not know.

This may not sound much like good news, but when an athlete qualifies for an Olympiad, they train harder than before, and they love it. When a person becomes a parent and loses sleep and learns new meanings for the word aggravation, they love it. And when a follower of Jesus hears him calling us to rise up against the oppressor and the aggressor, to demand justice with mercy, and peace for all, we love it.

Make no mistake. We are citizens of an imperial power, perhaps more benevolent in its intentions than Rome ever was, but an empire nonetheless. The divide between rich and poor is the greatest it has been in this country since 1929. According to the British news magazine, The Economist, we imprison a greater proportion of our population than Russia, Iran, and China. 748 out of 100,000 Americans are in prison right now. That's nearly one in a thousand, and most of them are serving long sentences for relatively minor, non-violent crimes. Yet we claim to follow a Savior who identified himself as the one God sent to "proclaim the release of the captives."

We could go on and on, but the point's been made: a follower of Jesus Christ living in our country is by definition a subversive seeking to turn the world toward God by resisting evil, no matter how necessary that evil may seem, and our work starts at home.

Now we are no strangers to division. The vicious commentary of the chattering class and the childish zero-sum game being played by many politicians has divided us sharply, though without much hope of reconciliation. The lines have been drawn in our society, and the sole solution seen by many is the conquest of their opponent. Working together on serious problems despite our differences has gone out of vogue. People are timid to enter into conversation on delicate topics unless they first know whether the other person's political leanings.

The sword dividing us, unlike the one wielded by Jesus, offers no hope of redemption, only the assurance of destruction. The signs are rife for any student of history. Jesus even chided the crowds that they knew how to predict the weather by looking at the clouds and sensing the wind, but they could not see what was happening in the world right in front of their faces.

Of course, our initial response to the challenge of discipleship is, "Who am I?" And indeed, who are you? Are you a beloved child of God? That means more than a ton of money. Are you rescued from death by the resurrection? I'd say that fact is more important than how others estimate your patriotism. Are you part of a family of faith that embodies Jesus Christ right here, right now? Than why should we cower and tremble? As Paul asked, "If God is for us, than who can be against us?" [Romans 8:31]

So where does it begin? Well, it already has. When we buy backpacks to give to school children so that they can carry their books, when we feed the hungry, nurture the lonely, embrace the outcast, visit the prisoner, those are revolutionary activities that help turn the world upside down and toward God. But there is much more we could do.

Precisely how we accomplish the work Jesus calls us to do can be as varied as the colors of a sunset, but we cannot deny that following Jesus means a little more than saying our prayers and being nice. Jesus didn't get crucified for being nice. He was executed because he was a threat to a power that took much and gave little. Jesus was killed, so that we might continue his ministry, make the tough choices, and together change a world in desperate need of changing. Amen.