

“Holy Smoke”

Isaiah 5:1-7, Luke 12:49-56, 8-19-07, Ray Larson

It was a chilly December 23rd afternoon with the temp being around -14. It was a Wednesday and that evening we were to have the monthly congregational potluck at the church.

I was tired and came home about 3 PM; the fire in the wood stove had just about gone out so I did what the song says and, “Put another log on the fire,” opened the draft a bit, and decided to lie down for a short nap. Judie said she was going to do the same.

It was a short nap; about 30 minutes later I woke up to crackling in the wall behind the headboard. At first I thought it was a chimney fire and metal from the triple lined, asbestos filled stainless steel chimney was expanding and making the crackling noise.

I went down stairs and everything looked ok but it felt like it was about 90 degrees. I quickly went outside to look at the chimney to see if there was fire coming out of the pipe, there wasn't. But...there were flames six feet high coming out of the attic at the peak of the roof.

I went back inside, called the volunteer fire department and we started to gather important papers. We continued doing that until we couldn't take any more chances and then waited patiently for the fire department to negotiate eight miles of icy roads.

Among the things we carried out were my father-in-law's ashes; so, with cremation and our house fire he has been through two fires so far... he was a pretty good guy so we're *hoping* that he won't have to go through a third.

Finally the fire department arrived and all we could do was sit in the car and watch the house burn.

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A fire started in some grassland out on the prairie near a farm. The county fire department was called to put out the fire. The fire was more than the county fire department could handle. Someone suggested that a nearby volunteer group be called. Despite some doubt that the volunteer outfit would be of any assistance, the call was made.

The volunteers arrived in a dilapidated old fire truck. They rumbled straight towards the fire, drove right into the middle of the flames and stopped! The firemen jumped off the truck and frantically started spraying water in all directions. Soon they had snuffed out the center of the fire, breaking the blaze into two easily controlled parts.

Watching all this, the farmer was so impressed with the volunteer fire department's work and was so grateful that his farm buildings had been spared, that right there on the spot he presented the volunteers with a check for \$1000.

A local news reporter asked the volunteer fire captain what the department planned to do with the funds. “That ought to be obvious” he responded, wiping ashes off his coat. “The first thing we're going to do is get the brakes fixed on the fire truck.”

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In reading the lesson today it wasn't very easy to find any good news in the message. The Son of God is not happy this time. Where is the good news from this Jesus?

Here is the new guy in town, a fresh voice, a different message, and a novel approach. He has more tricks up his sleeve than a starving magician. But this time he seems also to have some heartburn. He is breathing fire and the flames are scorching almost everyone in sight.

Can you imagine this scene in contemporary form; the committee to find a competent Interim Pastor has worked hard? They have looked into his background, interviewed him thoroughly, and pressed him for answers even he didn't anticipate. All are happy and then he arrives.

On the second Sunday he is in the pulpit he says, "Hey, you thought I came to pat you on the back, encourage you, and smile all the time? I've got news for you. I've come to light some fires; does anyone have a can of gas?"

Jesus, the interim pastor, had a ministry of 3 years, not to one congregation but to a general audience. No one was paying his salary and there were no contracts signed. Can you imagine how long he would have lasted if those conditions were imposed on him? Jesus, the first interim pastor in the history of the church, I'm surprised he lasted 3 years.

One thing we do know here is that Jesus was not a literalist. His words of fire were figurative but nonetheless they burned. There was a lot of dry kindling around the feet of Jesus; dead dry habits, dehydrated juiceless traditions. The desert conditions of Palestine were present in both land and law.

Jesus knew the pile of old dried out brush had to be set-a-fire before the new growth could sprout from the ashes.

But around religion there always seems to be firefighters and there certainly were then as well. These firefighters were the religious power brokers of the day. And it wasn't just the long of tooth it also included those younger who were next in line to take up the reins of power. The comfort zone of human experience is not easily changed.

They, like others, didn't know what kind of a fire they were fighting. Any good firefighter will tell you how important it is to know what kind of a fire it really is if you plan to put it out.

This fire would bring divisions in ways they hadn't imagined. Father vs. son, mother vs. daughter; it even gets the in-laws involved...so much for "Family values."

But, in the midst of this conflagration, the zinger is v-56. "Why do you not know how to interpret the present times?"

The obvious question is, how in God's good name and the churches' good deeds and the member's good names do we interpret the present times? The times they are a-changing.

What will the church look like in 25 years? Those who study these conditions don't even know. The best they can do is tell us we are in a great *period of transition*.

Others who are more brave will venture forth and make comparisons, for example, of the church and Starbucks. But, only time will tell us if the experience at Starbucks will parlay into the mission of the church. Leonard Sweet has written a book titled *The Gospel According to Starbucks*.

His thesis is that the experience at Starbucks is Experiential, Participatory, Image rich, and Connecting. He says our times in the church should mirror those four things, and of course we have a Starbucks group that meets in the Chapel during CE hour.

How do we interpret the present time? Is there a comparison between us and the crowd Jesus spoke to? Or, do we really have it right and should we refuse to change? If so, how is that different than all other major changes the church has faced through history?

We don't know! Do we want to know? If we had the hand of God reach down from the sky at this moment with a 10-page document of what we were to do in the next 2-5 years, would we dare to open it?

The document might be incendiary! We might be playing with fire. It might be too hot to handle. It might be a case of spontaneous combustion but after we have walked through the ashes we might be surprised at new things that come forth. Life tends to be that way for the child of God. The ash heaps of life are fertile ground for new growth.

PPC went through its version of fire and found it was not an easy walk, however, in the end we have emerged a little singed but non-the-less wiser and more able to interpret the signs.

We're a little more sensitive toward our foibles and conditions that can't be ignored.

And so, the smoke of divine fire is holy, but it may not make us happy. Yet in the glowing embers of memory, discomfort and even pain, there is the asbestos of God's incomparable compassion.

If the word of Christ should start a fire among us, where would it most likely begin and where would it spread most quickly? Who of us would be the first to act as fire fighters, who would be fanning the flames, and how would the following phrase be understood,

“Holy smoke, the church is on fire.”