Disturbing the peace: Luke 12:49-56

by Teresa Berger in the August 10, 2004 issue

In this reading from Luke we confront stark and conflictual sayings of Jesus that sit poorly with contemporary images of God. Our culture seems to prize a God with an infinite capacity for empathy, a God who is "nice." (Bumper stickers tell you that "Jesus loves you" even if everyone else thinks you're an ogre or worse.) Luke challenges this thinking. He offers a glimpse of redemption for a world that is anything but nice—and that needs much more than a nice God to redeem it.

As he journeys toward Jerusalem, Jesus becomes a source of conflict and opposition when he lays claim to startling forms of authority and power. His words are marked with a sense of apocalyptic urgency and anguished intensity. The road to Jerusalem, after all, leads to a violent confrontation with death. No wonder that Jesus' experience of life comes to be one of "consuming fire" (cf. Heb. 12:29). Here is someone, Luke tells us, who knows the burning bush intimately.

Experiencing a burning bush and a fire within does not make one "nice." On the contrary, an encounter with a burning bush invariably leads to confrontation and conflict. After Moses meets God in the burning bush, for example, he is led not to peace and a resolution of problems, but into conflict with Pharaoh himself. Moses' God-sustained confrontation with the Egyptians is part of a larger vision, one that is necessary for the sake of liberation and flourishing, and for the journey toward a promised if distant land.

This connection—between the experience of the burning bush, the struggle for liberation, and the glimpses of a promised land—sheds light on Jesus' stark claims. Contradicting the angels' promise of peace on earth at his birth, Jesus emphatically denies that he's come to bring peace. Instead, he claims to be the bearer of discord and fragmentation: "I came to bring fire to the earth." And "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" He illustrates this claim by defying traditional systems of meaning and cohesion, especially familial and intergenerational ties (and this in a cultural context in which kinship defined life). How can this be good news? The answer depends on how we see the world we live in, with its systems of meaning and cohesion.

If our world were nothing but a place of created goodness and profound beauty, a space of flourishing for all, just and life-giving for all in God's creation, then Jesus' challenge would be deeply troubling. If, on the other hand, our world is deeply marred and scarred, death-dealing for many life forms, with systems of meaning that are exploitative and nonsustainable, then redemption can come only when those systems are shattered and consumed by fire. Life cannot (re-)emerge without confrontation. This is the basis of the conflict Jesus envisions. He comes not to disturb a nice world but to shatter the disturbing and death-dealing systems of meaning that stifle life.

Lisa Fithian seems to understand Jesus' call to embody crisis. Fithian is a grassroots activist in the global peace-oriented movement for social justice. She has been arrested 30 times for intentionally creating crises, i.e., situations that force the powers that are—transnational corporations, the media, security forces, consumers—to cease doing business as usual, examine the inequities that they may be perpetuating, and change policies. In an interview last year, Fithian explained: "When people ask me, 'What do you do?,' I say I create crisis, because crisis is that edge where change is possible." I wonder: Is this not what Jesus meant when he spoke of bringing fire to the earth? Did he not seek to bring crisis as "that edge where change is possible"? Was he not saying, as Lisa Fithian says, I have come to bring crisis because business as usual means injustice and death?

The vision embedded in Jesus' stark words is not one of conflict for conflict's sake, but one of fragmentation for the sake of a wholeness. Someone who came to understand the latter was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As he struggled to live through the challenges of his own life faithfully, Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell in 1944 that he saw his life "split . . . into fragments, like bombs falling on houses." The violence of an inhuman war that he witnessed had shattered any sense of wholeness in his life. Yet out of this painful experience came a profound insight: "This very fragmentariness may, in fact, point toward a fulfillment beyond the limits of human achievement." As the world around him descended further into chaos, Bonhoeffer wrote:

> The important thing today is that we should be able to discern from the fragment of our life how the whole was arranged and planned, and what material it consists of. For really, there are some fragments that are only worth throwing into the dustbin . . . and others whose importance lasts for

> centuries, because their completion can only be a matter for God, and so they are fragments that must be fragments.

In the end, Bonhoeffer's own life became a fragment, abruptly broken off yet pointing to wholeness. As Bonhoeffer had understood in his prison cell, if brokenness and crisis were to become "that edge where change is possible," this crisis would have to be sustained by something stronger than the human. In a world whose systems of meaning do not bring life and flourishing, the crisis brought by the fire of the burning bush might just constitute good news. This gospel lesson calls us to witness to this good news and to the crisis that is God's consuming and compelling presence. Life cannot flourish without this crisis.