

August 17, Ordinary 20C (Luke 12:49-56)

Luke usually tones down the apocalyptic intensity we encounter in Matthew and Mark. Not here.

by [Greg Carey](#) in the [August 2025](#) issue

Published on August 10, 2025

Some biblical passages strike us as strange—until they don't. Another day comes, and the same text we once set aside resonates with us in an unsettling way. I wonder how many preachers who previously may have breezed by this passage from Luke now find themselves puzzling over it. I also wonder how this passage may sit with our congregations. With social division as sharp as it has been in a very long time, many will hear language about parents set against their children and in-laws against in-laws and draw quick connections to their own lives.

Readers will notice a whiff of apocalyptic fire in this passage. It concludes a larger section that begins at 12:35, where Jesus admonishes, “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” As he occasionally does, Jesus applies the metaphor of enslaved workers who await their enslaver's return. The metaphor sharply offends us, and we need not redeem it. We might note that Jesus adds a remarkable twist: for those faithful ones, the enslaver, the *kyrios*, will reverse roles and wait tables for his enslaved workers. Unfortunately, Jesus' teaching returns to its grim theme, as the *kyrios* beats those enslaved people who fail to demonstrate faithfulness in his absence. Preachers need not rehearse this context for their congregations, but it does frame the words that follow in 12:49–56.

Luke generally tends to tone down the apocalyptic intensity we encounter in Matthew and Mark, but that is hardly the case here. The language of household conflict also appears in Matthew 10:34–36, where Jesus' claim to spark division is even more, um, pointed: not peace but a sword. But Luke adds the element of end-time speculation, with images of the earth ablaze and signs in the sky.

Jesus offers a clue that accounts for his apocalyptic fire: he has a baptism to experience. He does not mean the baptism John provided back in Luke 3; instead, he

is referring to the suffering that will attend his arrest, torture, humiliation, and crucifixion. At this point in the gospel, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. This journey, known as the travel narrative, constitutes a significant block of Luke's story. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem at Luke 9:51 and does not arrive until 19:45.

Understanding Jesus' "baptism" requires an appreciation of how Luke interprets the fate Jesus will meet in Jerusalem. Just prior to this journey, the disciples experience Jesus' glorious transfiguration, which Luke interprets as "his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem" (9:31). As Jesus sets out, Luke introduces the scene with this language: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up" (9:51). "Exodus" and "taken up" suggest not so much that Jesus will suffer in Jerusalem as that he will be glorified. "Exodus" alludes to Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage, while "taken up" foreshadows the gospel's concluding scene, Jesus' ascension. Although Luke narrates the ordeal of Jesus' passion, the story emphasizes just as strongly his victory over death and his elevation to God's realm.

But Jesus' death is not simply a drama that must occur so that he can enter glory. Luke also interprets Jesus' suffering as both a tragedy and an injustice. Jesus twice laments that Jerusalem will fail to embrace his ministry (13:34-35; 19:41-44). Wise readers know how these twin laments have been turned against Jews and Judaism. Preachers need not mention them in sermons on this text, addressing the problem in other contexts, but this knowledge does frame the intensity of Jesus' rhetoric. Here Jesus presents his passion as an apocalyptic crisis, one that will set people against one another.

This passage invites us into a moment of discernment. F. Scott Spencer points out how Jesus challenges his disciples to a moment of critical reflection: "Do you think?" And, "Why do you not know?"

We must consider the signs of our time and assess what a faithful response entails. How well we know division in our own contexts. Our present conflict concerns not so much whether we accept or reject Jesus but what kind of Jesus we follow. One brand of Christianity seeks to exercise dominion over all of society, claiming Jesus' authority for itself. Another version, shared by most Century readers, would emphasize the Jesus who blesses, heals, feeds, and uplifts all people. One movement denounces the "sin of empathy" while the other tries to cultivate compassion for all. We face two powerful interpretations of Jesus that cannot be reconciled, and the church limps along with a fractured witness.

In the end, we are called to live the gospel, which bears good news rather than self-righteous posturing. Dare we enter the fire Jesus stirs up and bear words and deeds of peace and love?