



“War of the Worlds”

Luke 9:51-56; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

June 27, 2010

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

“He set his face toward Jerusalem,” Luke writes. Our translation is a rather weak rendition of a dramatic verb and a pivotal moment in Jesus’ story. Other versions render the sentence, “He set his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem.”

Perhaps it was the set of his jaw, a look in his eye, even a new firmness in his step. Mark reports that Jesus’ new and determined stride frightened them. They’d never seen Jesus like this. He knew his time was near when he would meet his fate in Jerusalem. With courage and firm resolve, he faced Jerusalem and the end of his mission.

But the disciples still didn’t seem to get it. Oh, they got the big picture: the kingdom of God was at hand and they were part of it; God was going to set things right once and for all; Jesus was ushering in the great reign of God’s shalom.

What they didn’t understand, no matter how many times Jesus told them and showed them, was the inner spirit of God’s kingdom. Nor could they get their minds around the radical and unconventional means by which that kingdom would be established.

Just a paragraph earlier in Luke’s account, with utter lack of humility or spiritual insight, the disciples were arguing about who would hold the highest office in the new government Jesus was about to establish. So, one more time Jesus tried to rearrange their moral and spiritual vision.

Hadn’t they noticed Jesus’ refreshing lack of pretense or sense of privilege? The one they called “Lord” didn’t act much like any Lord they’d encountered. Hadn’t they listened when he said he came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as ransom? Did they hear him say it was the humble and gentle who inherited the kingdom? And how did they miss his often-repeated statement, “Those who humble themselves will be exalted, and those who exalt themselves will be humbled”? And hadn’t he told them more than once he was going to suffer and die very soon?

The disciples needed a reversal of their ordinary, natural, and very human way of thinking about themselves, God, and the world. And we join them in their need. The Gospel Lesson from Luke 9 is a window into human nature and Jesus’ challenge to our humanity.

When Jesus headed toward Jerusalem, some one hundred miles to the south, he made a strategic decision. He took the short route rather than the longer way preferred by his countrymen. Between Jesus’ home in Galilee and his destination in Jerusalem lay Samaria, a despised nation and people. Most people avoided Samaria by taking the longer road to Jerusalem.

Jesus had a larger view of the world and decided the Samaritans deserved to hear the good news. After all, he was the one who said that in the new world he was inaugurating, we must love our enemies, and that one's neighbor is not determined by geography or race, but my neighbor is anyone with whom I come in contact.

As the band of disciples headed south, Jesus sent some of them ahead of him into the villages to tell the people that Jesus was coming and he had very good news for them. One Samaritan village told Jesus' messengers they refused to accept him or his message. Anyone heading toward Jerusalem was an enemy. Their worldview was simple and quite common. There's us, our people; and then, there's them, those people.

When the messengers came back with that report, the disciples were incensed. How dare they treat our leader and us so spitefully? Two of the disciples, brothers named James and John, reacted rather strongly. In fact their response indicates why Jesus nicknamed them "Sons of Thunder."

"Lord, should we call down fire from heaven and destroy those Samaritan heathens?" Now truth be told, I think we understand their outrage. The first response of most of us when hurt or insulted is to strike back. Revenge, even contemplated revenge, feels quite satisfying.

"No," Jesus replied. Revenge and retaliation are not the way of the Kingdom of God. He'd told them over and over that the new world God is creating works in a new way, a radically new way in fact. This new way is the way of the new alternative community being formed by the good news Jesus preached.

They'd heard it before, but apparently it didn't sink in. "Turn the other cheek," he'd taught them. "Love your enemies. Forgive one another. Do not judge. Bless those who hurt you. Blessed are the peacemakers." The message is clear. God's good news revealed in Jesus Christ challenges some very basic human behavior. God is creating a new world in the midst of the old world. Jesus teaches a radical new set of norms and values for the new community of disciples.

When we are hurt, insulted or attacked our first instinct is to retaliate. It's a natural defense mechanism and part of what makes us human. But that natural instinct needs to be restrained and more often than not, it isn't. From the playground to the office to international relations, we are programmed to strike back. It takes much more maturity to hold our fire than to retaliate. It's the way we are.

We keep score in relationships, hold grudges and wait to get even. "It payback time," we think. "It serves her right," we declare with a smile in our hearts. You know the anonymous old saying, "Revenge is a dish best served cold." Vengeance is a fact of life in homes, the workplace, and the corridors of power.

While natural, revenge is costly when unrestrained. Vengeance usually escalates and initiates a growing cycle of revenge that is destructive. Vengeance is an anger that misshapes the heart and harms not only its targets, but us and those around us. Revenge easily becomes out of proportion to the offence. Menachem Begin, former Prime Minister of Israel, once said, "We will cut off the arm of the hand that strikes us." Or, closer to home, "We should nuke them back into the stone age." In the end revenge creates cynicism, bitterness, unhappiness, and a warped soul.

The earliest codes of law known to humankind were intended to curb the human instinct of revenge. One of those ancient precepts is included in the bible, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That is legal precept, not a personal code of conduct. It is not meant to prompt revenge but to restrain it. Any punishment must be in proportion to the crime committed.

Jesus' disciples evidently missed the part of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, "You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say unto you (and I paraphrase), get a grip on your anger. Don't strike back, because it's counterproductive. Instead, return good for evil."

Jesus taught and practiced an alternative moral value system quite unlike ordinary human behavior. It's God's way, a way of living where love conquers hate, where peace calms violence, and where evil is repaid with good. It's a world where God's shalom reigns, and human nature is tamed and reshaped by the love and mercy of God.

This bold new world is demanding and difficult. Human nature resists God's way. It's simply not natural — and some say it cannot work. All of us must admit it seems impossible.

Human nature wages war with God's alternative world and its norms and values. When any of us give ourselves to God and become a follower of Jesus, we engage in a battle for our souls. It is a war of the worlds: our world and God's world.

St. Paul writes of this battle in his soul with strong language and vivid images (Romans 7:7ff). The battleground in his life was the simple command, "Do not covet." The moment the apostle attempted not to covet, the desire to covet, a most natural human urge, grew. The more he tried, the more difficult it became. He says he discovered two laws at war within himself, the law of God and the law of sin. He could not overcome his own desire to covet and became a captive of his own desires. "Oh wretched man that I am," Paul writes, "who will deliver me from this war of the worlds?"

Paul writes of this war in our Epistle Lesson, Galatians 5:13-26. Paul calls the larger world in which we live the world of the "flesh." He provides a list of attitudes and behaviors that are characteristic of the world of the flesh. This list is one of eight such lists in the New Testament. None of the lists are exhaustive, they point to typical behavior.

This list begins with three words we would expect of the word "flesh." They point to unrestrained sexuality in which God's gift becomes destructive. By the way, have you noticed prime time television lately? It seems every sitcom features unrestrained sexuality. And that is not to mention cable TV or the internet. Our culture is sexualizing all of life and imposing that world on our children.

The final three words in the list are also what we'd expect: unrestrained use of alcohol (or addictive substances) and its consequences. As all of know and some have experienced, drugs or alcohol used without restraint destroys both users and their relationships.

In between lie eight words in the list perhaps closer to home in a congregation of Christians. Paul uses eight words that describe our human natures at work in relationships. Listen to them: "enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy." Those attitudes and behaviors unrestrained destroy families, communities, and congregations. And they are always too much with us — all of us.

The gospel of Christ restrains and tames our natural tendencies. We still are who we are, but we are called to live under the restraint of the Holy Spirit in a community being formed by the norms and values of the world of God.

How? Back in Romans 7, after Paul wonders who will deliver him from himself, he cries in joy, I thank God through Jesus Christ my Lord. There is one who mastered human nature and who offers himself to us and promises to tame our souls.

But it's not automatic. We must surrender to Christ as the Lord of our life. He tells us to ask for his Spirit, God's Spirit who lives in us and works on us. And Christ calls us to live

faithfully in a community of people being formed and shaped by the power of the gospel.

That's why we come here, isn't it? We are practicing the attitudes and behaviors fit for the kingdom of God. So we sing to God. We pray for each other and the world. We listen to the word of God which bears transforming power and we share our lives with each other. We are partners in the gospel, in faith, and in life.

Over time, the world of the Spirit overpowers or tames the world of the flesh. But it takes lots of practice.

I've told you about the professor for whom I worked as a doctoral student. He was my mentor and he was preparing me for a life of teaching and doing it very well. He had big plans for me and was terribly disappointed when I chose a life in the church over life in the academy.

There was another, darker, side to our relationship. He was manipulative, controlling, and in some ways, abusive. He exploited our relationship in ways sometimes cruel. My fellow students loved to hear me tell of the latest indignity he'd visited upon me. They felt sorry for me, and I think they might have admired me for putting up with it for three years.

Nearly two decades after I completed my degree, I was back on campus for a conference. I'd not had a face-to-face encounter with him since I'd left. He was now an administrator at the seminary; one of the Deans, and his office was in the administration building, a lovely Neo-Georgian building with two spiral staircases in the lobby that led to the administrative offices.

As I began my ascent up the stairs, I began to remember all the humiliating and hurtful moments I'd endured. With each step my anger rose. Once more I wanted to strike back. I knew I had to get myself under control before I got to his office. So I did the only thing I knew to do, I said inside my self, "I forgive you." It was like a thousand pound weight fell off my shoulders and my soul.

Now I must add. The battle isn't over. I still have vengeance in my heart that needs restraint. I know I'll have to forgive him again and probably again. But, thanks be to God, I'm making progress. Over the years, the Holy Spirit, along with congregations of people like you, have shaped the new world of God in my soul.

There's more work to be done in you and in me, so let's keep practicing!

Amen.