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*Living with Integrity*  
*Psalm 26:1-3 and Luke 12:49-57*

The Gospel of Luke, a favorite of mine and  
perhaps a favorite of yours as well,  
begins with beautiful poetic songs of rejoicing:

Mary receives good news from the Angel Gabriel

She will bear the Son of God.

Her response: She sings – rejoicing:

**My soul magnifies the Most High  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior**

And with words of poetry – Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist

rejoices in the coming of the Messiah

the one who brings salvation

the one who will give light to those who sit in darkness

the one who will guide our feet into the way of peace.

And an Angel of the Lord proclaims to shepherds living in the fields

**Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy**

**for to you is born this day a Savior, who is the Messiah!**

Then an Angelic Multitude rejoices, singing.....

**Glory to God in the highest heaven**

**and on earth peace .....**

**Peace – God’s Peace on Earth!**

And when the baby Jesus -

is presented in the Temple in Jerusalem -

Simeon, a just and devout man of God,

who has been patiently waiting for the Messiah,

rejoices as he takes the baby, Jesus, his savior, into his arms...

praising God, saying...

**Sovereign God, now you are dismissing your servant in peace  
for my eyes have seen your salvation!**

Wondrous Peace that Jesus brings –

proclaimed in the Gospel of Luke!

And throughout the Gospel of Luke we hear that

this Glorious Peace is accompanied by

heroic deeds of Mercy and Social Justice

**Yes - Peace and Mercy and Justice – This Savior Brings!**

We hear this proclaimed by Jesus in the Synagogue

as he begins his earthly ministry...saying.

**The Spirit of God is Upon Me,**

**who has Anointed Me**

**to bring good news to the poor**

**who has sent me to proclaim release to the captives**

**and recovery of sight to the blind,**

**to let the oppressed go free!**

What Wondrous Good News of Great Joy! Peace, Mercy and Justice for All!

BUT .... and it’s a BIG BUT.....Along this road to Peace, Mercy and Justice

Jesus and his disciples come to a difficult juncture in the road.

That difficult juncture – is the difficult message of

today’s gospel reading –

A text that often makes us feel uncomfortable

**In fact - we would probably prefer to avoid this scripture text altogether  
... just let it pass us by.....**

This is the same juncture in the road that leads Jesus to Jerusalem -

a juncture that leads to sacrifice, to suffering and death!

**Can’t we avoid this – can’t we just pass this by????!!!**

Jesus says NO - I can’t let this pass by – I MUST do this –

even though I know I will greatly suffer – I must do this!

And Jesus says to his disciples and the crowd.....

**I come to bring fire to the earth...**

**Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?**

**No, I tell you - but rather division!**

Fire and Division in the midst of this Gospel of Peace?

It seems like a grave contradiction –

Perhaps the writer of the Gospel of Luke is mistaken

Jesus didn’t really say this – did he?

It makes no sense?

Fire and Division seem the very opposite of Peace!

What is this Fire that Jesus brings to the earth ?

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The Fire of Judgment?

The Fire that Refines and Purifies – A Crucible of Trial and Testing?

Or Perhaps it's The Fire of the Divine Presence,

That warmth and zeal and power of God's remarkable love?

Jesus speaks of A Baptism of Fire

Is this a Fire of Suffering and Death?

Or A Fire of Resurrection and a New Creation?

**Perhaps the Fire of which Jesus speaks**

**is All of This and More! But is this the way of Peace?**

And What is this - that Jesus is saying about bringing division,

including divisions in the family?

Why would Jesus want to do this – divide the family?

Father against son – daughter against mother

**Is this the Way of Peace?**

What about honoring your father and mother?

Indeed, honor your father and mother

but be prepared - if you walk in the footsteps of Jesus -  
there may also be division!

Jesus goes on to say – You are so wise when

it comes to predicting the weather.

When you see a cloud rising in the West

from the direction of the Mediterranean Sea

you proclaim it will rain and it does.

When you feel the wind coming from the south, from the desert

you proclaim there will be scorching heat and there is.

These things are obvious ..... you know this... from your experience

So why then .....do we fail to recognize and act upon

the kingdom of God in our midst??

Surely the redeeming life offered to us through Jesus

is just as obvious as the clouds and the wind!

We have seen the healing and reconciliation Jesus brings,

the remarkable mercy and love Jesus conveys to us,

the justice Jesus proclaims and enacts!

**So why do we fail to walk in the way of Jesus?**

These are challenging words – difficult words conveyed in this text

and also conveyed to us in those beautiful songs of peace  
we hear in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke.

Mary sings.... My spirit rejoices in God my Savior

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who lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things

Who scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts

Who brings down the powerful from their thrones

Who sends the rich away empty

**Is This the Way of Peace?**

And Simeon – when he embraces his savior, the baby Jesus, in the Temple -

Simeon rejoices that he can now depart in peace.

But Simeon also goes on to say to Mary and Joseph:

**“this child is destined for the falling and the rising of many....**

**And to be a sign that will be opposed**

**so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed...**

**and a sword will pierce your own soul as well.**

**AHHHHH..... - AND SO IT GOES - THE PEACE OF CHRIST – IT IS A PARADOX**

When Jesus reaches Jerusalem - Jesus weeps, saying...

**Jerusalem, O Jerusalem**

- **If you had only recognized the time of God's Visitation**

- **and the things that make for Peace**

Jesus said **My Peace** I give to you - not as the world gives!

So then what is the Difference between

The Peace of Christ and the Peace of the World?

The New Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible Says....

In the Biblical context

The world's peace is a peace of material prosperity

achieved through the victory of war

It comes at the cost of killing, maiming, oppressing, subjugating.

But the way of Peace that comes to us through Jesus

mirrors the meaning of Shalom in the O.T.,

That Peace which is wholeness and well-being

that comes to us through restoring relationships

with God and one another

through justice, mercy and love.

But this Peace of Christ -

sometimes comes with a cost – of conflict and division

Yes conflict and division and often rejection!

Remember the Story of the Prodigal Son

The younger son leaves home

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and squanders his inheritance in dissolute living  
But when he comes to his senses - he returns home with a penitent heart.  
And his Father goes out to meet him  
and welcomes him back with a warm embrace and great rejoicing

When the older, obedient brother sees this...

he is incensed, indignant – and alienated by this.  
And he turns his back on his father and younger brother  
and refuses to join in the celebration of his brother's return.

### **A house divided**

by Living the Way of the Peace of Christ...  
The Way of Justice, Mercy and Love...

The Way of Christ's Peace can also divide our nation:

On April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1963 when it becomes clear that  
the promises made to integrate Birmingham AL  
will not be fulfilled....

it is then that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

leads African-Americans and those accompanying them  
in actions of nonviolent civil disobedience  
to desegregate – to integrate –  
to bring equality to African-Americans in  
Birmingham. AL.

This results in many being beaten and thrown into jail.

And while in jail - Dr. King receives a letter

from liberal white clergy who severely criticize him for his actions,  
They say what he has done is “unwise and untimely”  
They accuse him of being impatient!

Dr. King responds:

If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church,  
it will lose its authentic ring,  
forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club.

Indeed, we have lost a generation in our churches

perhaps due to our unwillingness to stay the course of the Peace of Christ!  
A Just and Merciful Peace....

Have we lost our young people

due to a Lack of Integrity? Do we fail to Practice What We Preach?

**You can't Fool Young People – They see us only too clearly!**

But we often fail to see ourselves clearly – burying our heads in the sand.

**Jesus called it – hypocrisy - in today's Gospel Reading**

We don't want to rock the boat of our comfort and security!

It is not easy for us – my friends!

The white liberal clergy also write this to Dr. King – -

**The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth.**

Dr. King responds:

**Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time,  
from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time  
that will inevitably cure all ills.**

Time – cures – all ills? We often say this!

Those words come to us from our comfortable Pews!

The sins of Jesus' time – were not so different from our own –

Debtors Prison – Yes - The Poor Imprisoned because they are poor  
People Lost, Lonely, Alienated, Filled with Fear  
Violence the Order of the Day  
Racial and Gender Discrimination  
Gross inequities – unfair distribution of resources  
Foreigners – Immigrants – Abused and Oppressed

As the Young People - who used to be in our churches would say...

.....**What would Jesus do????**

Jesus said - The in-breaking of the Kindom of God on earth is at hand!

But has the kindom of God broken into our hearts, into our lives...???

Jesus ushered in a new way of living – A New Way of Peace

Love your enemies - Pray for those who persecute you  
Welcome the foreigner  
Put an end to violence – an end to swords and guns  
Free the oppressed and the enslaved  
Heal the wounds of social injustice  
Forgive debts –  
Redistribute resources so that none have too much, and none too little  
Uplift the status of women, children, the marginalized, the poor,  
the undocumented immigrants in our midst.

Martin Luther King, Jr. goes on to say to these liberal white clergy....

**We will have to repent in this generation not merely  
for the vitriolic words and violent actions of the bad people  
but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people.**

Jesus says in the closing line of today's Gospel Text...

**“And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right, what is just?”**

Do we live as if Jesus NEVER came into our lives?

Or Do we live with integrity - doing what Jesus would do?

Jesus brings us to a moment of Crisis – that pierces our own soul

A moment of decision – a moment of truth –

We Must choose – WITH NO EXCUSES

YES - We must choose

The World's Peace Or the Peace of Christ!