

**“When the World is So Messed Up that Even God is Stressed Out”**

**Luke 12:49-56**

**Rev. Andrew Connors**

**Proper 15**

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“Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth?” Well, yeah, Jesus. Peace is what the angels said you’d be bringing back in the 2nd chapter of the same book. I don’t like this Jesus very much. I want the one back that we had a couple of weeks ago. The “blessed assurance, Jesus is mine,” Jesus. The lovey Jesus who will snuggle up with you when the world’s falling apart. I thought we had advanced past that judgy God who hurls down fire, insults, and Victorian values - progressed beyond them to the comforting God who leads by example and not through fear and threats.

But here he is - the god we thought we had left behind, ready to throw down fire on the earth! Which is disappointing, except that if I were God, I think I would have resorted to the fire already by now. “Nothing works. Everything is hard” - someone said recently describing their day but they could have been describing the country. The polar ice caps are melting even faster than we thought, FBI agents are getting death threats from some of the same people who tried to overthrow our democracy a year and a half ago, a new Pew research poll shows that our divisions are getting more entrenched, not better, and the more I read about social media the more I’m convinced that the technology is rewiring our brains in destructive ways we’re just beginning to understand. Yet who dares tell your teenager, “no social media for you”?

So yeah, if I were God I’d probably be checking out the situation and wondering, well I know I promised I wouldn’t ever reboot humanity with a flood. How about a fire this time?

We’ve grown accustomed to thinking about Jesus as our security blanket - the one who we can retreat to to make everything feel better, instead of the God who speaks of love *and* justice, of kindness *and* righteousness. But the all comfort, no judgment God is not good news as anyone who’s ever been on the receiving end of an oppressor knows all too well. While he was still a slave in 1832, Frederick Douglass held out hope that his master’s conversation at a Methodist revival meeting would lead to better treatment, maybe even to his freedom. The opposite is what happened. “Prior to his conversation, Douglass wrote, “he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty.”<sup>1</sup> A Jesus who comforts the oppressors while they go on oppressing is not good news for anyone. A Jesus who comforts

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<sup>1</sup> I’m indebted to F. Scott Spencer who highlighted this story in *Luke: The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2019, 337. Spencer quoted the text from Meacham, *American Gospel*, 125 (from Douglass, *Narrative*), 44).

planet-killing industry moguls and consumers like you me while we go on destroying the planet for millions of creatures and for those who will come after us is not good for anyone. A Jesus who brings peace when what is needed is justice is not good news for anyone.

Jesus brings judgment to the earth - judgment for our reckless waste of the planet. Judgment for our complicity in systems of slavery old and new. Judgment for our refusal to counter the greedy selfishness of our time with a new neighborliness that Jesus preached his whole life. There is judgment on everything that stops us from doing our part as individuals and as a community, to counteract the destructive forces on the rise in our time.

And still, Jesus doesn't bring the fire. Instead, he brings his full immersion in our world and all of its problems. That's what the cross is - God's full immersion into the sin and pain of our world. God's full immersion into the suffering that we cause by our own hands. God's full immersion into the death-dealing that we see from the the trigger of a gun, to the knifing of novelist, to the army of a tyrant to the hateful speech of a reckless political leader, to the oppression of our racial systems cooked up in the imaginations of the powerful and fed to the world and each of us from the moments of our births.

This is not the God who sees all of our messes and rises, zen-like above it all, disinterested. This is the God who is so fully immersed in the world's problems, that he's totally stressed out. I know the NRSV translation in your pew bible has him sounding like a first year drama student with a poorly written script saying "what constraint I'm under" until all this is finished. But it's better translated, what "stress" I'm under. How "pressed down," how "stressed out" I feel facing my own impending death and the suffering of this world.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is as stressed out as we are which is surprising to find out in my late 40s. You know, I've kind of counted on Jesus as being above it all so I can learn from him. Love and serve and all that, but still be so centered in my spiritual life that nothing that happens can really get to me. But I think that rise above it all idea of spirituality probably comes from toxic masculinity or maybe too many MacGuyver episodes as a kid. It doesn't come from Jesus.

Jesus is fully present to his own suffering and stress. Which is a good reality check for odd people like yourselves who are trying to live a spiritual life in a time of total depravity. Living in a city where children feel it's in their interest to spend hot days on corners cleaning windshields is supposed to stress you out. Living in a city where you have to count to three before proceeding through a green light lest you get T-boned is supposed to stress you out. Watching the insane chasm between the richest billionaires and the rest of us growing to even more absurd heights while the poor and hurting are on every street corner begging for food or money is supposed to stress you

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<sup>2</sup> Spencer, 344.

out. Hearing the newest reports on what we have done to our planet and what is still to come is supposed to stress you out.

The God of the universe in the person of Jesus seems to be saying - hey people, the proper response to what you are experiencing is not to try to tame it with religion or drugs or social media or money or special diets. It's just to weep and gnash your teeth and pray that more people will see how absurd it is that we all choose to live like this. Because the minute you voice that reality, is the moment you realize not only what is wrong with the world, but how it could be different.

One of the ways I've grown as a parent in the last several years is learning how much I had absorbed the erroneous idea that my job as a parent is to protect my own kids from what I'm experiencing through pretending. Pretend the stuff happening in the world isn't troubling me as much as it really is. Or pretend I'm not as stressed out as I sometimes am. My job, I thought, was to pretend so that I wouldn't add to their stress or worry or concerns. The problem with that approach is that I was robbing my children of learning how to process their own stress, their own worry, their own hurt in the world which is what children really need. Not adults who pretend they don't hurt, but adults who teach them what to do with it.

That's what Jesus is teaching us not only about who God is but how to be human. How to live with the pain when the world is on fire. How to live in systems that chew people up and spit people out, and numb the bystanders who see the violence and the pain and don't know how to deal with it. And what I'm learning from Jesus is several things.

One is that he keeps doing the work. Jesus still loves, still gives himself to others, still serves other people even while he's stressed out. We tend to think of this as noble or whatever, but sometimes I think it's just like any other kind of discipline. It forms you. It shapes you. Like people often think that the fact that I'm a preacher is a noble thing. But sometimes I wonder if I chose being a preacher because this way I know I have to be in church on Sunday. I have to engage with the holy text that documents people like me who struggle to know how to live in a world where hope always seems to be fading and love is under assault. The discipline is good for me especially when I don't feel like it. I bet Jesus sometimes heals people when he doesn't feel like it, teaches people when he's lost confidence that it makes a difference, listens to people when he feels like nothing's going to change. The discipline of the work might be noble. But it could also be the thing that sustains itself.

The other thing I notice about Jesus is that he always surrounds himself with community. It's not a perfect community by a longshot. The disciples are not what you might describe as the most loyal of friends. They're substandard students. They ask stupid questions. Jesus sticks with them and I daresay, needs them. In recent years, one wing of the church has spent a lot of time arguing that the family is the building block of society. But Jesus seems more concerned with people who don't have that.

Family, it seems, already promised more than it had delivered to many. The Jesus community was to be the place for those who fit the culture's model family as well as for those who don't. Community for everyone.

Obviously, community has taken a hit during the pandemic and I often get anxious questions about how we are going to "get everyone back to church." That's certainly a big focus of the session and the staff but I'm not really worried - one because the church has been around for a couple of thousand years. I don't think TikTok is going to finish us off. But two, there has never been a time in my life where it was more clear that most of the alternatives outside of taking a hike, are not providing what they promised.

Ezra Klein made the point clearly in his article this week about the corrosive effects of social media. "Instagram," he wrote summarizing the comments of Jonathan Haidt, "is changing how teenagers think. It is supercharging their need for approval of how they look and what they say and what they're doing, making it both always available and never enough. Second, [that] it is the fault of the platform — [that] it is intrinsic to how Instagram is designed, not just to how it is used. And third, [that] it's bad. [That] even if many people use it and enjoy it and make it through the gauntlet just fine, it's still bad. It is a mold we should not want our children to pass through." Or as Haidt said so succinctly, "There is no way, no tweak, no architectural change that will make it OK for teenage girls to post photos of themselves, while they're going through puberty, for strangers or others to rate publicly."<sup>3</sup>

Or take Twitter. "Twitter," Klein wrote, "nudges its users toward ideas that can survive without context, that can travel legibly in under 280 characters. It encourages a constant awareness of what everyone else is discussing. It makes the measure of conversational success not just how others react and respond but how much response there is. It, too, is a mold, and it has acted with particular force on some of our most powerful industries — media and politics and technology. These are industries I know well, and I do not think it has changed them or the people in them (including me) for the better."<sup>4</sup>

Klein's article isn't an argument against technology and neither is this sermon. It's an argument that we need human spaces to bring our attention to the purposes and practices of what it means to be human. To discuss the purpose of why we are here and the practices we need to support our answers to that question. We need spaces where the algorithms are completely transparent - you can see for yourself who gains what based on all of our choices. Church, as problematic as it can be, is that kind of space.

Citing the work of Jenny Odell, Klein argues that the real question is one of attention. Attention, she says, is contagious. Which means that to whom and to what

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<sup>3</sup> Ezra Klein, "I Didn't Want It to Be True but the Medium Really Is the Message," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/07/opinion/media-message-twitter-instagram.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

you give your attention to is a critical question of importance to your health and maybe our future together.

Jesus gives his attention to community, prayer and study, people, and I'd have to add good food. Mostly he gives his attention to the purpose of practice of what it means to be human in a violent time when the structures of his own world have come apart and with them the assumptions that so many have carried. He names his stress and his grief and anger over what's wrong with the world so he can keep on loving, giving, serving.

Is that the right path for you? I don't know. But I'll tell you this. Caesar may have ruled an empire, but 2000 years later it's the life and teachings of Jesus we're all still studying.