

I have always struggled with sending Christmas cards, both with getting them in the mail on time and with choosing appropriate designs. Some of my friends and family who are far enough away for me to send a card because I wouldn't get to visit in person are spiritual but not really religious. So that means trying to find a card that is a happy medium between, say, Snoopy dressed like Santa Claus, which is cute but not really representative of why I celebrate the holiday, and something with a traditional manger scene that wouldn't be very meaningful to them. I have sometimes settled on the dove with the "Peace on Earth" message, because even folks who aren't into virgin birth can still get on board with world peace. And of course, we read plenty of scripture around that time of year pointing us to God's promise of peace connected to the birth of the Prince of Peace.

So in Luke's gospel today, when Jesus asks, *Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?* my first reaction is, *Well, yeah, actually, I did think that was why you came. We sing songs and read stories about it. In fact, it's been a few thousand years and we're starting to wonder what the hold up is...* If we think about our Christmas cards and carols evoking peace, we may be as surprised as Jesus' first followers to hear him answer his own rhetorical question: *No, I tell you, but rather division!* But our expectations may have been shaped by only hearing what we want to hear: When Mary sings to Elizabeth about the significance of their pregnancies, she says:

*God has shown strength with his arm
and scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;
filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty.*

That certainly sounds like a recipe for division. And after Jesus is born, when he is presented in the Temple, Simeon prophesies to Mary:

'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, 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 too.'

So when Jesus tells us he came not to bring peace but division, he is only telling us what we should already know: that the peace God promises through Jesus is not the polite, complacent avoidance of conflict that allows us to maintain a façade of unity. The peace God promises through Jesus is the character of a new community that only exists on the other side of a reordering of passions and priorities—an upheaval of world views that is sure to pit people

against one another. The fire Jesus speaks of is not the warm comfort of an evening at home beside the hearth or *Kum ba ya* sung around the campfire with marshmallows. This is the fire that renews the fertility of a forest, but only on the other side of destruction; the fire that refines gold and silver but by burning away impurities—that tempers steel at dangerously high temperatures. The results are strong, beautiful, and life-giving...but the process to get there isn't easy and is far from peaceful.

The temptation is always to use Jesus' words to justify division that is not the result of the hard work of growing toward godly community but comes instead from self-centered pride or stubborn inflexibility. We disagree and point to these verses, and we say some version of *See—Jesus warned us we would be divided from those people who voted the other way at the committee meeting, who didn't agree with this plan or that project, who took sides with them...* and of course, we assume that the division is a result of our faithful response to Jesus' call over and above the faith-less folly of those with whom we disagree. And truly, some deep divisions exist over issues of justice and righteous that our just and righteous God cares about very much. But some of our arguments are pretty petty, and we sometimes try way too hard to elevate our own preferences from adiaphora to gospel imperative.

The division Jesus warns—or promises—that he brings is not an excuse or an endorsement of arguing for the sake of arguing. He didn't come because he *wanted* to see fathers and sons, mothers and daughters fighting with one another. But that kind of division is the logical consequence of following Jesus in a new way of living that takes us away from our old priorities. If we are going to be changed by the gospel, the way we relate to those around us is going to change. And in case you never noticed, people don't always like change. We even resist changing our dysfunctional relationships because they are familiar to us, and there's comfort in what is familiar—enough that we're not always supportive when the baby of the family grows up and becomes independent, or the one who would always go along with the crowd starts asserting an opinion, or the friend who never turned down a party gets sober. How much more discomfort and disagreement might we expect when someone attributes a change in their life, priorities, and behavior to the discernment of God's call in their life?

In personal and systemic ways, God calls us to radical transformation, because we are citizens of a broken world and our human instincts obscure the image of God in us in which we were created. We understand the need for transformation, and we get excited about what that end result will look like—God's *shalom*, the peace that passes understanding that reflects the world as God intended it to be—whether we envision that in ourselves as individuals or in a whole healthier society. But between where we are and where we are called to be, there is a ton of hard, messy transformative work. May God give us strength and courage for that struggle, which we don't undertake on our own, but only through the Spirit who empowers us to do it.