Luke 9:51-56
The last message that Jesus gave in Galilee appears to have been on the subject of humility. For immediately after Matthew and Mark record their accounts of the discourse, they proceed to write about His final departure from His native province (Galilee) to journey south. Matthew says, “And it came about that when Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee, and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan” (Mt. 19:1-2; Mk. 10:1). However, neither of the authors give any details about this journey. They do not even mention Christ’s visit to Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication which occurred in the winter. John records this feast (Jn. 10:22-23), from which we know that the farewell to Galilee took place at least four months before the crucifixion. Nonetheless, the journey was not without interesting incidents. Luke preserved several of them in his Gospel.

One of the incidents is recorded in the text before us (Luke 9:51-56). The words used by the evangelist to introduce his narrative obviously allude to the same journey from Galilee to the south. Matthew and Mark speak about this in passages we have already mentioned. The journey through Samaria, which Luke refers to here, occurred “when the days were approaching for His ascension,” that is, near the end of His life. The unique expression, “He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem,” is a clear hint that Christ’s work is being transferred from the north to the south. However, it does not only refer to the geographical direction He was going, but also, and primarily, to the frame of mind He was in when He traveled. He went toward Jerusalem and felt that His responsibility was in and near that city from this time on. He would be a victim who consecrated Himself to death. His countenance was solemn, earnest, and dignified. It expressed the great and noble purpose which animated His soul.

It was natural for Luke, the companion of Paul and the evangelist to the Gentiles, to carefully preserve this anecdote from the last journey Jesus made to Judea through Samaria. It admirably served the purpose that he kept in mind throughout the time he was compiling his Gospel. Specifically, it illustrated the all-inclusive nature of the Christian faith. Therefore, he gathered it into his basket that it might not be lost. He placed it in his Gospel in a very appropriate place - right after the anecdote about the exorcist. We do not even have to speak about the fact that in the case of the exorcist, John is the narrator and, in this situation, he is one of two disciples
actually involved in it. This current incident, like the one just before it, shows a striking contrast between the harsh spirit of the disciples and the gentle, gracious spirit of their Master. It is this contrast that creates the moral interest of the story.

The main fact in the story is this: Jesus and His traveling companions arrived at a certain Samaritan village at the end of a day’s journey. The inhabitants of this village were asked to give them a place to stay for the night. But they declined. So James and John came to their Master and proposed that the offending villagers should be destroyed by fire from heaven.

**A Closer Look at John**

It was a strange proposal for them to make. These men had been Jesus’ disciples for years. It seems especially strange that John would say such a thing. For he had been with Jesus when He met the woman by the well. There he had heard the delightful words Jesus used to speak about the glorious new era that was dawning (John 4). They demonstrate how slow the best are to learn the heavenly teachings and how to practice love. How shocking, once again, to think that this same John would go down from Jerusalem a year or two after this savage suggestion and preach the gospel of Jesus, the crucified, in “many villages of the Samaritans” (Acts 8:14,25). It is possible that he was preaching in this very village which he desired to see destroyed!

These are the contrasts which growth in grace brings. When John was in the green, crude stage of his spiritual life, he was opinionated, judgmental, demanding, intolerant, and full of blind, passionate zeal. He would try to imitate someone like Elijah. But when he was spiritually mature, after the summer sun of Pentecost had done its work in his soul and sweetened all its acid juices, he became a fervent apostle of salvation and demonstrated in his character the soft, luscious fruit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). No matter how surprising these contrasts are in the same person at different periods in their lives, they are perfectly natural. In the midst of all changes, the elements of one's moral being remain the same. The juice of the ripe apple is the same that was in the green fruit, plus the light and heat from the sun. The zeal of the Son of Thunder did not disappear from John’s nature after he became an apostle. It only became tempered by the light of wisdom and softened by the heat of love. He did not even stop hating. Nor did he become an indiscriminately friendly person whose love made no distinction between good and evil. To the very end, John was what he was at the first - an intense hater as well as an intense lover. But in his later years he knew better what to hate. He abhorred hypocrisy, apostasy, and Laodicean insincerity (Rev. 3:14ff.), and not just ignorant rudeness and clownish impoliteness as he had in the past. He could distinguish between wickedness and weakness, malice and prejudice. And while he held on to strong feelings of revulsion toward some, he felt only compassion toward the others.
To some it may seem unbelievable that a man who was capable of entertaining such a revolting idea, as is here ascribed to James and John, could ever be the disciple whom Jesus loved. In order to understand this, it must be remembered that Jesus, unlike most men, could love a disciple not merely for what he was, but for what he would become. He could be content with even sour grapes in their season for the sake of the wonderful fruit into which they would ripen. Furthermore, we must not forget that John, even when he was possessed by the devil of resentment, was animated by a purer and holier spirit. Along with the smoke of fleshly passion, there was some divine fire in his heart. He loved Jesus as intensely as he hated the Samaritans. It was his devoted attachment to his Master that made him resent their rudeness so much. He had a tender love for the Bridegroom of his soul. And so he was as beautiful as a mother who overflows with affection for her family. However, in his hatred, he was as terrible as the same mother can be in her enmity against her family’s foes. In fact, John’s nature was passionate both in its virtues and in its faults. Like all people, he could be both exquisitely loving and exquisitely bitter.

**The Cruel Proposal**

Let us now leave our personal remarks about John and look at the cruel proposal that was made by him and his brother. We must be careful not to regard it simply as an extravagant, sudden, and violent outburst of anger because the hospitality was not offered. No doubt, the two brothers and all their fellow-disciples were annoyed by the unexpected rudeness. No one should be surprised that it put them in a bad frame of mind. Weary men are easily irritated. And it was not a pleasant thought that they would have to trudge on to another village after they were so fatigued from the day’s journey. But we should not have too high of an opinion of the Twelve. The fact is, they were capable of taking revenge for that rudeness by committing murder.

The savage mood of James and John is not even thoroughly explained by our recalling that the unfeeling villagers were Samaritans, and that they were Jews. The constant ill-will between the two races had, without a doubt, its own influence in producing hard feelings on both sides. The nationality of the travelers was one (if not the sole) reason the villagers refused them hospitality. They were Galilean Jews going south to Jerusalem, and that was enough. On the other hand, the Twelve, as Jews, were just as ready to take offense as the Samaritan villagers were to give it. The powder of national hatred was stored up in their hearts. And a spark - one rude word or discourteous gesture - was enough to cause an explosion. Though they had been with Jesus for years, there was still much more of the old Jewish man in them than the new Christian man. If they had been allowed to make their own choices, they would have probably avoided the Samaritan territory altogether. Like the rest of their countrymen, they would have taken an alternative route to Jerusalem by crossing over to the east side of the Jordan. When people have such strong feelings toward each other, offenses are certain to happen. When Guelph (members of a political party in medieval Italy that supported the authority of the Pope) and Ghibeline (the aristocratic party who opposed the authority of the Pope), Orangemen (members of a secret society
instituted in northern Ireland in 1795 to uphold the Protestant religion and ascendancy) and Ribbonmen (an Irish secret society organized about 1808 to oppose the Orange organization; they were named from the badge which was a simple green ribbon, and was worn by all the members of the society), Cavalier (a partisan of Charles I of England in his struggles with Parliament (1641-1649) who were opposed to the Roundheads) and Roundhead (a member or supporter of the Parliamentary, or Puritan, party in England during the English civil war (1642-1652); originally a derisive term, with reference to the Puritans’ close-cropped hair, in contrast to the Cavaliers’ long hair) meet, it does not take much to make a quarrel.

But there was something more at work in the minds of the two disciples than party passion. There was conscience in their argument as well as anger and race-related hatred. This is evident, both from the deliberate way in which they made their proposal to Jesus and from the reason by which they tried to justify it. They came to their Master and said, “Do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Apparently they had no doubt they would gain His approval and immediately obtain the desired fire from heaven for the execution of their appalling intent. Then they referenced Elijah, who refused to have any dealings with the idolatrous king of Samaria and called down fire from heaven to consume his messengers as a clear indication of divine displeasure. The conscious motive by which they were energized was evidently sincere jealousy for the honor of their Lord. But, nonetheless, it was ill-advised. The prophet of fire (Elijah) was outraged at the conduct of King Ahaziah because he sent messengers to Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to inquire whether he would recover from the disease he had (II Kings 1). So the Sons of Thunder were outraged because the inhabitants of the same godless territory over which Ahaziah ruled had presumed to insult their respected Master by refusing a favor which they should have been proud to have the opportunity of granting.

The Samaritans
The two brothers thought they were doing the right thing by being angry. And if they had tried to defend their conduct after it was condemned by Jesus, they might have had a plausible argument. But they did not do this. Now consider who the Samaritans were. They belonged to a mixed race, the heathen Assyrians, whose presence in the land was humiliating, and from base, degenerate Israelites who were unworthy of the name. Their forefathers had been the bitter enemies of Judah in the days of Nehemiah. With spite, they obstructed the building of Zion’s walls rather than helping the exiles in their hour of need, as neighbors should have done. So, if it was unfair to hold the present generation responsible for the sins of past generations, what was the character of the Samaritans who were living then? Weren’t they blasphemous heretics who rejected all the Old Testament Scriptures except the five books of Moses? Didn’t they worship at the site of the rival temple on Gerizim? Their fathers, with ungodly boldness, erected this temple in contempt of the true temple of God in the holy city. And finally, didn’t these villagers sympathize with all the sins of their own people and repeat them all in this one act by
showing dishonor to Jesus, who was greater than even the true temple? Was He not worthy, not only to receive common politeness, but also divine worship?

Ruthless persecutors and angry zealots who have such believable arguments have always been confident, like James and John, that they were serving God. The very nature of zealotry is to make the man who is a zealot believe that the Almighty not only approves, but shares his fierce passions. He believes he has been entrusted with unlimited power to launch the thunders of the Most High against all in whom his small, peering, inhuman eye can find anything that has not been approved by his tyrannical conscience. What a world this would be if they were entrusted with this power!

Every pelting officer
Would use God’s heaven for thunder; nothing but thunder.

Thank God this is not so! The Almighty does thunder sometimes, but not in the way His petty officers would like.

Merciful Heaven!
Thou rather, with Thy sharp and sulphurous bolt,
Splitt’st the unwedgeable and gnarled oak
Than the soft myrtle.

Even Jesus, as gentle as He was, had His thunderbolts. But He reserved them for different targets than poor, unenlightened, prejudiced Samaritans. His zeal was directed against great sins and powerful, privileged, presumptuous sinners. But He did not strike out against poor, obscure, common sinners. He burst into rage at the sight of His Father’s house that had been turned into a den of thieves by those who should have known, and did know, better. He only felt compassion for those who did not know what they worshiped and groped for God in semi-heathen darkness. His spirit was kindled within Him when He saw the ostentatious orthodoxy and piety that was connected to the grossest worldliness. He did not, like the Pharisee, blaze up in self-righteous wrath against sinners who were not at all religious, and who might not worship at all. Nor would He be angry with people like the Samaritans who did not worship in the right place. If only the zeal like Jesus had were more common! This kind of zeal would aim its bolts at the proud oak and spare the humble shrub. But such zeal is dangerous. Therefore, it will always be rare.

Jesus’ Response
The two disciples wanted to call down heaven’s fire to vindicate their Master. But Jesus lost no time in making known His total lack of sympathy with the monstrous proposal. He turned and
rebuked them. According to later manuscripts, He said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of” (Luke 9:55). It is a doubtful reading and is therefore omitted from the most reliable manuscripts. Nonetheless, it is a true saying.

The saying was true in more than one sense. In the first place, the spirit of James and John was not as they thought it was. They thought they were motivated by zeal for the glory of their Lord, and to some degree, they were. But the flame of their zeal was not pure. It was mixed with the bitter smoke of fleshly passions: anger, pride, and self-will. Their spirit was not appropriate for those who were the apostles of the gospel, the messengers of a new era of grace. They were chosen to preach a message of mercy to every creature, even to the chief of sinners. They were to tell of a love that did not allow itself to be overcome with evil but sought to overcome evil with good. They were to found a kingdom that was composed of citizens from every nation, where there would be neither Jew nor Samaritan, but where Christ is all and in all. What a work to be accomplished by men who were filled with the fire-breathing spirit of the “Sons of Thunder”! Obviously a great change had to occur within them to prepare them for the high calling they had been called to. Once again, the spirit of James and John was, of course, not like that of their Master. He “did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them” (later manuscripts contain this phrase also after verse 55). In order to see the difference between the disciples’ thinking and that of Jesus, put this present scene beside the one that happened on Samaritan soil - the meeting by the well. We know what we have seen here. But, what do we see at the well? The Son of Man, as a Jew, is speaking and dealing with a Samaritan. He is seeking to abolish chronic and deep seated enmities between man and man. As the Friend of sinners, He is seeking to restore a poor, erring, guilty creature to God and holiness. As the Christ, He is announcing the close of an old era in which even the worship of the true God was ritualistic, exclusive, and tied to particular locations. The beginning of a new religious era would be characterized by the attributes of spirituality and universality. We see Jesus rejoicing, enthusiastic in His work. His very food and drink was to reveal to men one God and Father, one Savior, one life, all without distinction; to regenerate individual character, society, and religion; to break down all barriers that separated man from God and from his fellow-men, and to become the great Reconciler and Peacemaker. He has already demonstrated this in His conversation with the woman at the well. Now, as He is thinking about the work He has come to do, He speaks to His surprised and unsympathetic disciples as one who sees on the eastern horizon the first faint streaks of light which proclaims the advent of a new and glorious day. And all around, in the field of the world, yellow crops of grain are ripe for the sickle. In essence He says, “The blessed, long-expected era, after a long night of spiritual darkness, is coming very quickly. The new world is about to begin. Lift up your eyes and look on the fields of Gentile lands and notice how they are white and ready for the harvest!” At the time of the meeting by the well, the disciples with Jesus neither understood nor sympathized with His high thoughts and hopes. The bright hope on which His eyes were riveted was not within their horizon. For them, as it is for children, the world was still small - a
narrow valley enclosed by hills on each side. In contrast, their Master, up on the mountain top, saw many valleys beyond in which He was interested. He believed many people would find their way out of these valleys into the eternal kingdom. The disciples still believed that God was the God of the Jews only. Salvation was for the Jews as well as of them. They only knew one channel of grace - Jewish ordinances; only one way to heaven - the road which lay through Jerusalem.

Luke’s scene before us comes near the end of the training of the disciples. Instead of progressing, the disciples seem to have regressed. Old, bad feelings seem to have intensified instead of being replaced by new and better ones. Not only are they not in sync with their Lord’s mind; they are antagonistic to it. They are not merely apathetic or skeptical about the salvation of Samaritans but bent on their destruction. Hostility and prejudice have grown into an outburst of enmity.

So it did. Things must get worse before they begin to mend. There will be no improvement until the Lamb is slain to take away sin, to abolish hatred, and to make one new man out of two. It is this knowledge which makes Jesus turn His face so steadfastly toward Jerusalem. He is eager to drink the cup of suffering and to be baptized with the baptism of blood. He knows that only in this way can He finish the work that He spoke to His disciples about in such glowing language on the earlier occasion. The very wrath of His devoted followers against the Samaritan villagers makes Him pick up the pace on His journey. As He moves on, He says to Himself, “Let Me hurry on, for these things cannot end until I am lifted up.”