

Fire! Jesus wants to bring “fire to the earth,” but let’s not immediately go to the end of the world. Fire in Luke 12 is a purifier’s fire. Hellfire and brimstone *is* in the Bible but not here. Purifying fire is desperately needed today, which I will talk about in a moment. Fire is also indicative of the presence of God. (See Exodus 14 & 19, as well as Isaiah 30.) This Holy Spirit fire is a power to conquer resistance (Jeremiah 23:29) and to defeat enemies (2 Kings 1:2-14).

Jesus is coming with a fire of purification and refinement (Luke 3:16-17) and longs for it to be kindled (Luke 12.) The fire that smokes injustice and changes hearts is far different than the fire that I hear about from my youth, where God is going to send you to perdition for thinking bad thoughts.

Tangent, but not really – immigration -- With all the stories in the news about immigration, I really wanted to wrap my head around the headlines while engaging scripture. I don’t want to convince you of my perspective, or tell you what you should think. I’m far from having a global perspective on immigration. But, I hope you can use this as a tool for a broader, purifying understanding.

Let’s look at one piece of the puzzle - one small, densely populated country - El Salvador (roughly the same size as Massachusetts). If I accomplish my goal, we might be able to connect Jesus’ words about fire and division to our own day and have purified hearts here and now. The oppression Jesus lived through in his day is remarkably similar to Central America today. In antiquity, people were either incredibly wealthy or crushed by Roman imperialism. In current times, El Salvador is a country crushed. If you find any of this questionable, or you just want to know more, I have included multiple links throughout. I am not presenting myself as an expert or especially well researched, but as somebody deeply troubled by and deeply interested in the world around me.

Skip down to “What’s the point” if this ‘box o’ history’ bores you

El Salvador’s recent history- <https://medium.com/s/story/timeline-us-intervention-central-america-a9bea9ebc148>

1932: There’s a rebellion led by peasant farmers. The rebels, mostly indigenous, are wiped out by Maximiliano Martínez, the president. The United States and Great Britain have huge land/coffee investments in El Salvador, so they send their Navies to help quell the rebellion.

1960: A military-civilian cooperative promises free elections. but “Red Dread” was strong! Eisenhower and the US opposed free elections for fear of the country turning Communist. A right wing counter coup takes (re-takes) control.

1980–1992: A civil war happens between the military government, ARENA, and the leftist FMLN. Reagan and the US funded the war and trained government forces. Overall 80,000 are murdered and 85 percent of civilian deaths were committed by the Salvadoran military and death squads (ARENA). The United States makes this a front line battle against communism (proxy war). Cuba did do some military training, but an enduring link to Soviet funding has not been well established. Outside communist funding did not reach the level that the US provided (4 billion through USAID alone) https://www.jstor.org/stable/3805283?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

1980: Oscar Romero is killed at the beginning of the Civil War. I think it’s safe to say that if you know any El Salvadoran, it’s him. As a member of the Roman Catholic clergy, he is elevated to bishop as a right-leaning social conservative. But his friends and colleagues are being murdered for helping the poor - I am not exaggerating. This creates a profound dissonance / conversion experience for him, and he preaches weekly radio sermons to the whole country about what he sees. I caution overreach - Romero never went to the far left liberation theology, but at the same time he refused to turn a blind eye to the death squads.

"History Box" continued from page 1 *Not so fun fact* - it was considered your duty to kill a clergy if you were on the Government's side at that time. The slogan was -"Be a Patriot. Kill a Priest."

<https://www.teachingcentralamerica.org/history-of-el-salvador>

Civil War continues. The military wanted to eliminate the FMLN "zones of control." US military advisors stated that all residents of these zones were guerrilla fighters. In other words, one could be shot or bombed for being in a bad neighborhood. **The disappeared** -- Mothers who had lost their children to violence started showing up in public with their children's pictures for decades. Still do today.

1984: 97% of Salvadoran asylum seekers are classified as "economic migrants" and don't qualify in the US. A religious sanctuary movement in the United States publicly sponsors and shelters asylum seekers.

1980's in US -- A "little" gang was formed in Los Angeles, now known as MS-13. What started as a way to protect vulnerable Salvadoran kids, turned very ugly and is demonstrably evil today.

1990: Congress designates Salvadorans for Temporary Protected Status (TPS). TPS never applied if you were a violent criminal. You were sent back to Central America (like MS-13 members who were caught). We, as a country were a bit freaked out back in the 90's, and I would be too if I lived in a place like Los Angeles. *Mayhem ensues as MS 13 goes "back" to El Salvador*, Can you imagine what it would be like to come back to a country destroyed by Civil War, no rule of law, and you are part of a gang / cartel? MS-13 essentially runs areas of the country today.

2001: 7.7 earthquake. The last thing this country needs. Massive landslides do enormous damage.

2006: El Salvador enters the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) thousands of citizens protest.

2014: The U.S. threatens to withhold almost \$300 million worth of development aid unless any preferences for local crops were removed. Multinationals need only apply!

What's the point? For the last few decades we have had a border crisis that we definitely had a role in creating, but there is no one factor that can shoulder all the blame. I offer El Salvador to you as a case study for how to think more broadly about what seems like an isolated event but is really the fruit of decades of 'development.' If I can get broad, maybe Central America can help us contextualize how to understand Jesus' words in an imperial Roman system. Cuba and Russia were meddling too in Central America, just not as affectively as the United States was. Regardless, I would almost certainly be packing my bags if I lived in El Salvador - either during the civil war or in its aftermath.

Back to Jesus: Can we pray for a purifying fire within ourselves, as we see brothers and sisters fleeing in terror to our borders? Can we long for purification to be kindled in the same way Jesus longed for a world to not be marked by oppression, degradation, and terror? Romero got this vision and did something with it; he spoke up for those who had no voice, even when he knew it would not end well for him.

This is a small moment in time on our southern border rooted in nearly a century of "stuff.", I believe God is asking for us to seek God's purifying vision. There are a variety of political perspectives that have different degrees of effectiveness. There is a view that is not valid -- seeing immigrants as subhuman, dirty, or beneath contempt.

Take two and call me in the morning: Here is your sure fire formula for purification- Take one part heart, two parts openness to those who suffer, and stir with the Holy Spirit. Results may vary! If you look at the scripture today where Jesus is talking about households divided - Brother against sister etc. I am sure there are members of even your own family who are divided on immigration. But I'm wondering if we can make the divisions be a focus of our prayers. Can we let these difficult feelings and divisions be the first irritant that prompts us to pursue the most important things - the cleansing presence of God? I pray for the courage *to even dare to pray* for changed hearts and hands ready to serve - immigration or anything else. This is a good starting point, not just for a specific political issue, but for the sake of the whole world. **Todd**