

Sermon  
September 3, 2017  
Based on Exodus 3:1-15  
Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

“Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
through whom You brighten the night.  
He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.”

This is a verse from a poem written by St. Francis of Assisi, which he called a canticle of the creatures. Over the next few weeks, I will be sharing some of these passages from this beautiful poem as we reflect on how creation and the cycle of life and death reveal something about God. Today we are focusing on fire. Through the ages, fire has suggested the presence of God.

There was a song that many of us sang when we were younger, especially if we were at church camp as kids. “It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around will warm up to its glowing. That’s how it is with God’s love, once you’ve experienced it, you want to spread his love around, you want to pass it on.” Often this song is sung while sitting around a campfire. The campfire is the central gathering spot, the tents set up in a circle around that central spot. It’s at the campfire where we roast our hotdogs and marshmallows, where we tell ghost stories and joke around, where we sing songs, and where we silently gaze upon the flames of orange and red, watching the glowing embers and the sparks that float up into the sky, hearing the cracking and popping of the burning wood, that quiet roar of the fire, and occasionally experiencing that burning sensation in our eyes as the smoke engulfs our faces.

There’s something about fire that many find attractive. I’ll admit it, when I was young I was a little bit of a pyromaniac. Many of us when we were kids loved to set stuff on fire. They warn you not to let kids play with matches for a reason. There’s something magical about taking a small stick that’s red on one end in which, by quickly rubbing it against a rough surface, bursts into flame. Whenever we had a campfire,

my boys when they were younger were constantly wanting to throw stuff on the fire, leaves, sticks, paper, anything at hand that might burn. We would drop marshmallows in the fire to see them instantly expand and turn charcoal black. One time they wanted to celebrate the end of the school year by burning up all the papers they had in their book bags.

But it's not just the process of setting things on fire and watching the process of wood turning to ash. There is something almost hypnotizing by watching the constant flickering of the flames, the constant shifting of the colors of orange and red, and sometimes even seeing some blues and greens, depending on what you're burning. Fire doesn't just warm our hands and feet on crisp nights. It warms our hearts and lifts up our spirits. Fire draws us in. Like what Francis wrote long ago, Brother Fire brightens the night and is beautiful and cheerful. Fire can lead us into prayer and meditation. Fire can open us up to the presence of God.

Now it has to be said that the fire I have been talking about is a controlled fire, a lit match, a campfire, this is fire that is contained and managed. People who live in the western U.S. readily associate fire in a not so comforting way. They have seen the impact of wildfire. Even as we have been focused on the historic flooding in south Texas, there is a massive fire that is threatening areas of Los Angeles. People living in parts of L.A. and Burbank had to evacuate in front of the largest fire in Los Angeles city history, over 5,000 acres. People who have lived through the ravages of a firestorm will say that it was apocalyptic, like hell on earth. Perhaps you have seen images on TV, people filming with their phones what it looked like inside their cars as they fled their homes from the raging fires. It is scary to watch on our screens, how much more actually being in it. Earlier this week, an early morning blaze tore through a house in Westerville, in which a 17 year old girl, a student of Westerville South, was trapped and succumbed to the flames while the rest of her family managed to get out. When fire is out of control, it is destructive, frightening, even deadly. There is a reason why hell is portrayed as a lake of fire, where the flames never die out. As Francis wrote, Brother Fire is powerful and strong. This is a kind of fire that is much more challenging and uncomfortable for us to associate with God.

Talk of God raining down fire and brimstone sends a chill down our spines. Fire can be uncontrolled, destructive, frightening.

It shouldn't be difficult then to understand why fire is often associated with the presence and power of God and especially the Holy Spirit through the scriptures. Fire is powerful and demands respect, and also comforting and warms us from within our hearts. Today we heard about Moses herding sheep on the mountain of God when out of the corner of his eye he saw a bush on fire. And then on closer inspection he noticed that the bush wasn't turning into ash. That's odd. And as he draws closer to figure out this mystery, God speaks through the flames, telling Moses to take off his sandals for he is treading on holy ground. And Moses covered his face out of fear.

Later, as Moses is leading the people through the wilderness toward the promised land, God went ahead of them in the form of a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night. When Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments from God we read that God had descended to the mountain in fire while smoke engulfed the top of the mountain. The description forms in our imagination what looks like an active volcano.

There's the story of when Elijah bested the priests of Baal. He told them to set up wood and call on their god to set the wood on fire. They cried out to their god all day long while Elijah mocked them. Finally, they gave up. So Elijah arranged the wood and dug a trench. He then told the priests to pour water on the wood pile. They poured so much water on the wood that the trench was full to overflowing. Then Elijah prayed to God. And after that simple prayer we read in 1 Kings 18:38 that the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the wood, the stones, and even licked up the water in the trench.

In the gospel of Luke we read where John the Baptist said that he baptizes with water, but one is coming who is greater than him, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. In Acts, on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples, what appeared to be flames of fire rested on each one of their heads, as if they were human candles. Hebrews 12:29 states, "For indeed our God is a consuming

fire.” We see examples throughout the scriptures that the presence and power of God is associated with fire.

The presence of God as fire is found in our own Wesleyan heritage. It was the evening of May 24, 1738. John Wesley was attending a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. It was while someone was reading Martin Luther’s introduction to the book of Romans that Wesley later wrote in his journal that he felt his heart strangely warmed. He writes of this experience, “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” It was a pivotal moment in Wesley’s life, a turning point that set him on his course to form a movement to renew the Church of England which, as it turned out, led to the formation of a new denomination, of which we are heirs. His heart was set on fire that evening.

This enflamed heart is picked up on with the United Methodist symbol of the cross and flame that we have today. Just look at the hymnal in front of you. The symbol has a cross with two flames superimposed on it. One flame represents the Methodist Church and the other flame represents the Evangelical United Brethren Church. These two churches united in 1968 to form the United Methodist Church. Each church symbolized by a flame makes me think of Rev. 2:1, which speaks of the seven golden lampstands. Each lamp represents one of the seven major churches that existed when the Revelation was written. Each church that exists is like a lamp burning the light of Christ in the world.

If you haven’t already, note the fire we have in this sanctuary. We have the candles burning on the altar, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit. We have above the lectern over here a candle burning in this lamp. Every week this candle is replaced by another so that the flame never goes out of this lamp, an eternal flame. We light this Christ candle on Easter and the Sundays following to acknowledge the presence of Christ. During Advent we light purple candles to mark the drawing near of Christmas. And on Christmas Eve we light candles and sing Silent Night as we celebrate the birth of the one who is the light of the world.

So on this day as we reflect on what Francis called Brother Fire, I encourage you to be mindful of the presence of God's spirit whenever you see fire, a candle, a camp fire, or even a wildfire. May the breath of God fan the flame in our hearts, that we might always burn with passion for God and for the world that God loves.

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