

God of Wonders: Fire

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**A Sermon Preached by
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Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

Exodus 3:1-4 NRSV

When the day of Pentecost had come, [the disciples] were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Acts 2:1-4 NRSV

There's a reason that it's against the law to yell, "Fire!" in a crowded movie theater. Fire is scary. A wildfire is raging in Arizona. So far over six hundred square miles have burned; that's half the size of Rhode Island. Sometimes fire hits close to home. Two decades ago Em and Dave Clemmer's home in Camp Hill burned to the ground. They began their new life with only the clothes on their back and faith in their hearts. It's tough to recover from a loss like that. Fire can leave scars, inside and out. Fire can be unpredictable,

destructive, and uncontrollable. Hollywood monsters and small children run from it because no one wants to “get burned.”

But there’s another side to fire, too. It is also useful, essential, and transforming. And that’s the side that we’re looking at today, because most of the time in the Bible fire is a good thing; it’s a god thing.

In Biblical times fire was absolutely vital for living. You needed fire to cook food and bake bread. You needed fire to heat your home at night and during the cool of winter. You needed fire for night reading or to guide your steps walking in the dark. You needed fire to bake pottery and for tempering metals. You needed it for clearing fields and purifying gold. Fire was something that everyone had to work with just to survive. In Jesus’ day, living without fire was impossible.

Maybe that’s why fire is one of the Bible’s most common metaphors for God.

In the Bible, fire is often a sign of God’s presence. When God wanted to make himself known to Moses for the first time, Yahweh could have appeared in many ways – through a talking bird, in a polka-dot cloud, or inside a first-century fortune cookie. But God chose *fire*: a burning bush. Later on, when the Hebrews were crossing the Sinai wilderness, they followed a pillar of fire each night. [Exodus 13] To the Hebrews that pillar of fire wasn’t simply something that God sent to help them – they believed that they were being led by God himself – and they were. And when God gave the law to Moses on top of Mount Sinai, the whole mountain top was covered in fire. [Exodus 19:18] It shouldn’t be surprising, then, that when Jesus comes again he’ll be somehow wrapped in fire, too, says Saint Paul. [2 Thessalonians 1:8]

So whenever fire appears in a Bible story, we need to ask ourselves, “is this more than just *fire*, but a sign that *God* is here? Think of the two disappointed disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were crushed after what they saw on Good Friday. A stranger came up to them and started teaching them about the promised Messiah. They invited the stranger to lunch and it was when the man broke bread with them that they finally recognized him as Jesus. That’s when they said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us,” when Jesus opened the Scriptures to us? That wasn’t heartburn the disciples were feeling: it was God lighting a fire inside them. [Luke 24:13-35]

Sometimes fire is a symbol of God's presence; other times it is a sign of God's power and judgment. Fire isn't just a metaphor for God's anger; at least in Old Testament times it was one of God's preferred methods of *expressing* that anger. Did you ever hear about "fire and brimstone" as a kid growing up? Those images of judgment day come from the Bible. [e.g. Revelation 20:10]

My favorite time that God used fire to show his unique power was on top of Mt. Carmel in the north of Israel. God's prophet Elijah wanted to prove to the prophets of another god, Ba'al, that Yahweh alone was the one true god. So Elijah challenged those other prophets: we'll both build altars and put logs out for a fire – the god who *lights* the fire is the true god. Ba'al's prophets went first. They prayed all morning. No fire. They danced around the altar until they were limping. No fire. They cut themselves. No fire. They tried everything. It was getting dark, and still no fire.

After some trash-talking to the other prophets ("Is your god asleep? Is your god in the bathroom?") it was Elijah's turn. He asked his helpers to take four large jars of water and empty them out onto the logs, soaking the wood. Then he had them do it again. Then he had them do it a third time – until water was running out the bottom into a trench. And then Elijah prayed to God loudly so all could hear: "Answer me so that this people may know that you are God." Just as Elijah finished his prayer, the Bible says, fire fell from the sky. It burnt all the wood, all the stones from the altar, and dried up every last drop of water that was in the trench. [I Kings 18]. Now *that's* a display of power; that's what our friends at the War College call "shock and awe." Next time you see lightening, let it be a reminder of the power that God has to render justice to those who try to defy him or try to harm his children.

I once bought an old cast iron skillet at a rummage sale. It had a hard thick crust of baked on something or other that simply wouldn't wash off, scrub off, or peel off. I was about to throw it out when someone told me to build a hot fire in the backyard, then put the skillet right in the middle of it, and leave it there until the fire burns out. So that's what I did. When I dug the skillet from the ashes the next day *all* of the crust and crud was gone and the skillet was ready to be used again. That's the purifying power of fire. That's what God can do in our lives – make us good as new.

So in the Bible fire is a reminder of God's *presence* and God's purifying *power*. It's also a sign of God's transforming work. Think of that first

Pentecost. The disciples hadn't done anything disciple-like yet; they were pretty much ordinary folks trying to figure out what to do next. They were gathered together – probably praying – when fire – literally, “tongues as of fire” – descended on each of them. But like the bush thousands of years before this was no fire of judgment; they weren't *consumed* by it. Instead, they were *transformed*. Like fire can turn clay into pottery and metal into jewelry, the fire of Pentecost transformed the disciples into the most powerful apostles the world has ever known. The fire was a sign that they were filled with God's Holy Spirit. No wonder the gospel spread like wildfire to every nation on earth.

It's easy to see what fire represents in most passages of the Bible, but did you ever wonder what Paul means when he says in his letter to the Romans,

[I]f your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.

Romans 12:20

This verse is a head scratcher isn't it? How is heaping fiery coals on our enemies a way of loving them the way Jesus did?

First, let's be honest -- who hasn't wanted hot coals to rain down on someone at some point? Paul is quoting a verse from Proverbs, but he's also appealing to the hunger for justice that that we all have. At the same time, though, Paul tells us that vengeance is God's job, not ours. [Romans 12:19]

If in the Bible fire is a sign of God's presence, power, and transforming work, then there is more at work in those burning coals than revenge. Maybe Paul is saying that if we can love our enemies like Jesus did it will be like showering the presence of God on them. It will show them the power of God to overcome evil—even the evil impulses inside of us. It will show them the transforming work of God in our lives – and help them to see what God can do for them, too. Paul is saying that by doing good to our enemies we will purify and transform them, like a hot fire purifies and transforms metal.

So fire is a good thing in the Bible, a god thing. Then we are we so afraid of God's fire in our lives?

We who call ourselves the “frozen chosen” sometimes get a little nervous around people who are “fired up” for God. We like things to be predictable,

controlled, and planned: Presbyterians do things “decently and in order.” We don’t raise our hands in worship unless it’s to ask a question; and we don’t even do that. I’m not saying that we aren’t faithful, we are. I’m saying that sometimes we’re content to be lukewarm in our discipleship. No wonder we don’t see the same kind of miracles the disciples did. The story of Pentecost tells us that God works best through people who are willing to burn white-hot for him.

I don’t know that many of us over the age of 18 who are ready to totally surrender to God, to make themselves a living sacrifice, an offering for God’s altar. We sing about it, but I’m not sure we’re ready to do it. It seems that every time we approach the temperature of combustion, we cool things off before things can get too crazy.

I like big campfires in our backyard. I have the burn-holes in our lawn furniture to prove it. So whenever we’re making s’mores as a family I spend a decent amount of time running around the backyard dousing sparks with the garden hose before they can start a fire in the dry grass.

I wonder if some of us aren’t like that in our own spiritual lives. God sends sparks of inspiration our way – ideas, visions, and dreams of what we might do with our lives, of how we might help people, of how we could use our time or resources to make a difference – and instead of fanning those sparks into a roaring fire, we shower them with a hose – or we just let them die out. They seem too crazy, too unpredictable, too life-changing, too dangerous. It’s a safe way to live, but it’s sad.

What if we just let those sparks burn and watch what happens. Imagine what you would look like totally committed to God. You wouldn’t become someone else, you wouldn’t become obnoxious or holier than thou, you’d be you – just you totally passionate, totally alive, totally fired up. Imagine a whole church fired up for God. What could stop us from spreading God’s love? NOTHING.

We can’t set ourselves on fire, but we can kindle the sparks that God sends. To do that we need to surrender ourselves, offer ourselves, to God. Don’t worry that you don’t feel particularly faithful right now, *dry* wood burns best. Don’t worry that you’re already feeling burned out, you won’t be *consumed*. Offer yourself to God and you will be *transformed* – maybe into an earthen vessel of God’s grace or a metal tool for building God’s kingdom. No

matter how young or old we are, we can all burn brightly for God, if we don't run from the fire of God's spirit.

I went to Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake High School in upstate New York, near Saratoga. The "Burnt Hills" part of our name came from a practice of the Mohawk Indians who lived in that area a hundred or more years before I was born. Their men used to set fire to the wooded hills in the fall so that after the winter tender new growth would spring up. When deer would come to feed on that new growth, the Mohawks would take the deer for food.

God's fire can mean new life, sustenance, and growth. We don't have to be afraid of it.

- So where in your life have you felt a spark that you can fan into something more –maybe an idea to help others? Maybe a relationship that needs to grow.
- Who are the *firefighters* in your life? In Biblical terms, firefighters aren't heroes. They're the ones who give you a hard time when you say that you're thinking about going on a mission trip or changing your job so you can have more time with family. They snuff out your God-given dreams. Maybe it's your parents, or spouse, or boss, or kids. What do you need to do deal with them?
- And what are the *fire extinguishers* in your life? Those things that tend to kill fires, things like laziness, fear, and worry about what others might think of us.
- Finally, fires need oxygen, fuel, and heat to grow – what do you need to tend your fire? That's something to pray about.

Fire is a good thing. It's a god thing. In the Bible and in our lives. Amen.

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