

God as Flame

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Pentecost, June 6, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Exodus 3:1-12](#) and [Acts 2:1-21](#)

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As I've contemplated flame this week, I've found my thoughts drifting to fire. I like to light a candle to mark a time as sacred. I have gotten lost in the single flame of a candle. And who doesn't like the candles on a birthday cake, even if there needs to be almost two-thousand of them? But still, my thoughts kept drifting from flame to fire.

Twice in my life, fires in woodstoves have kept me warm in otherwise very cold conditions. One winter when I was living in western Washington, there was a windstorm that brought down many branches and trees. The branches and trees took down electrical lines. And because I lived in a ruralish area, it took a full week before power was restored. My furnace was a heat pump, so I moved into the family room of my home where there was a woodstove in the fireplace. I dragged the mattress from the guest bed down there and made a little nest for myself. And each night, I lit a fire, warmed up the room, then turned down the flow of air into the stove to keep the fire burning slowly through the night.

The other time happened when I was staying in my father's cabin in New Hampshire during the first week of September. Labor Day weekend, the temperature plummeted, as it can do in New Hampshire. It got so cold I woke up in the middle of the night. I got a fire going in the woodstove in the cabin and about an hour or two later the little cabin had warmed enough that I could get back to sleep.

When I think about fire, I think of it contained in a woodstove or a fireplace or a campfire. I think of it warming me and comforting me and stilling my spirit. I think of seasoned maple and pine logs snapping and popping as they burn. The closest thing to a destructive fire I've experienced was a chimney fire I had that I didn't find out about until I contemplated switching insurance companies and the new company insisted on a building inspection. It had burned hot enough to crack the terracotta flue liner, but briefly enough I never knew it happened.

That's fire's paradox, isn't it? On one hand, fire gives warmth and light, and it lets us cook and read late into the night. And on the other hand, fire destroys and consumes. It devours whole towns, annihilates whole cities. "Fire is essential for life and civilization, and fire is a threat to both."¹

The big challenge that cold night in the cabin was that I had to get out from under the pile of blankets to get a fire going. Well, that was the first challenge. The second challenge was that I needed more wood than was inside and I needed kindling. So I had to go outside for those. The third challenge was that my father and step-mother had recycled the newspaper, so I had to scrounge for something to light with the matches that would light the kindling that would light the logs. The challenge the next day was getting things in

¹ Lauren F. Winner, *Wearing God*, (New York: HarperOne, 2015) 206.

the wood stove cool enough that I was comfortable leaving the cabin for a paddle around the lake.

“We could say the same of life with God – we cannot always summon a sense of God’s presence, even when we do the things we were taught in Sunday school would work; in other seasons, God roars into our lives in ways we wish we could avoid, tamp down, put out entirely.”² It takes the match to get the newspaper burning, and it takes the burning newspaper to light the kindling, and it takes the burning kindling to ignite the log. It is the rare person who can burn for God without some external source of heat. I know I didn’t get there on my own. My mother and Sunday School teachers and friends helped lay the fire and ignite the newspaper.

And once the fires going, it takes tending. I know I’ve built plenty of fires that were much more smoke than flame. And I’ve tended fires that got burning so hot and fast that they consumed the fuel in no time at all. And I’ve tended fires that weren’t sufficiently fed or that got too spread out and then cooled off and went out. And so it is in my friendship with Jesus. My zeal might burn too fast, or it might cool down and flicker out. Either way, the flame is extinguished. Sure, there are habits, practices, I can engage in to tend this fire, to keep the flame of God’s presence near. Still, sometimes the flames leap and dance, not because of anything I did. Sometimes the flames die, despite everything I did.³

“God appears as flame again and again in scripture. God reveals God’s self to Moses in the burning bush, and then, centuries later, at the first Pentecost after Jesus’ death, the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples as flame. Those two episodes might be the most familiar flames in scripture, but there are many other instances of God drawing near to people as or in fire: God’s presence as a ‘flaming torch’ in the covenant [making] of Genesis 15; the pillar of fire that leads the Israelites through the wilderness [into freedom]; and God’s glory is ‘like a consuming fire’ on Sinai....

“What might all these flames mean for our friendship with God?

“Often, in scripture, especially in the prophets, fire seems to stand principally for God’s anger, God’s jealousy.”⁴ But even there, it is not just the consuming fire, the destructive fire. Even God’s anger and God’s jealousy need not be a conflagration. According to Malachi, God is like a refiner’s fire, that burns off the impurities leaving only the precious metal. Sometimes fire’s destructiveness is also regenerative. “Fires can clear weaker trees from a forest and therefore allow the healthier, larger trees to flourish. Soil nourished by burned vegetation becomes more nutritious for the trees that remain. And some trees require fire to survive,”⁵ like the lodgepole pine and several other conifers.

“Could the Bible’s fiery imagery suggest that God’s destruction is regenerative? That God destroys not me but my sin, my hardness of heart, my fear, precisely so that I might be renewed? ...

² *Ibid*, 208.

³ *Ibid*, 208-209.

⁴ *Ibid*, 209-210.

⁵ *Ibid*, 210.

“Maybe, if God is fire, we are a grove of ponderosa pines. Without the heat and burn of God’s flame, our pinecones would remain closed tight around the seeds that are needed for our thriving and growth and new life.”⁶

The rabbis note that it takes some time – five minutes, seven minutes, ten minutes – for a bush to burn. But the miracle, they say, is not that the bush wasn’t consumed as it burned. The miracle is the Moses paid attention, that he paid attention long enough to notice that the shrubbery was not being consumed. “Only after God saw that Moses had stood still long enough to notice the bush in its unconsuming fire did God call out to him... Attentiveness, apparently, was the key attribute God needed for his chief prophet, deliverer, and friend. God needed a prophet and friend who could stop and stay still and look with focus and concentration; God needed a prophet and friend who could really see. God could have called to Moses in the form of a fellow shepherd, or in the form of a rock, or in the form of a breeze. Instead, God arrested the attention of Moses as a flame.”⁷

This doesn’t surprise me. As I said, I can get lost in the flame of a candle. I can sit in silence as a fire crackles and hisses and flames curl around the logs. At one point this week, I thought about playing the yule log during this sermon. I thought it might be funny, and calming, and maybe even comforting. I decided it would also be too distracting. Like me, too many of you would just get lost in the flames.

But maybe that’s why the burning bush worked as a way to call to Moses. “Fire captivates. To encounter the blazing God is to encounter the God who can hold, and wants to hold, our gaze.”⁸

I suppose one invitation from the story of the burning bush is the invitation to notice how busy our lives are, to notice how hard it is to notice. “We are all so distracted, rushing so hurriedly through the day that we barely notice our friends or ourselves,”⁹ let alone God. We get distracted, sending text messages, checking Facebook, worrying about children.

But this isn’t the only lesson. God wants to hold our gaze. “The God who wants to fix our attention and say, Here, look here, look at Me, don’t look away – that God is a lover. That’s what lovers do, after all. They gaze at each other utterly not distracted, utterly focused in their longing and their delight.”¹⁰

In her book, *Wearing God*, the book we’ve used as the basis of this sermon series, Lauren Winner tells a story¹¹ that is, unfortunately, too long, to simply read to you. The story centers around two basins. One basin is the basin she and her friend Isaac take every year on Maundy Thursday to what she says is “a small, ineffectual protest at an immigration detention center in Cary, North Carolina. Every year, a stalwart band of Holy Week pilgrims gathers in a grocery parking lot in Cary, and ... [they] process to the immigration detention center and set up two chairs. One chair is occupied by whoever is

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 221-225.

having her feet washed, and the other chair is left empty, as a reminder of the people who are absent from us – from our families and our churches – because of current immigration law.”

On one particular Maundy Thursday, Winner’s thoughts wander to another basin, a basin carried my Nhat Chi Mai to a Buddhist temple in Saigon on May 16, 1967. “Her friends assumed she was there for the traditional washing of the Buddha, but her basin was full of gasoline, not water. Nhat Chi Mai poured the gasoline over herself and lit herself on fire. She sat in the lotus position while she burned, and she prayed, and she died.” She had written to the U.S. government, “I pray that the flame that is consuming my body will burn away all ambition and hatred which have been pushing many of us into Hell of the soul and creating so much suffering among human beings. I pray that the human race will be able to inherit Buddha’s Compassion, Jesus’ love, and the legacy of man’s humaneness.”

Reflecting on the differences in their basins – Nhat’s held gasoline; Winner’s holds water – Winner writes, “It is a venerated thing in the Christian tradition to imitate Christ even to the point of death,... I wonder what kind of faith one would have to have – in the resurrection, in the resurrected body, in setting your treasure by in heaven – in order to burn yourself to death in protest. I am not alone in not knowing what to think: even Buddhists and Christians in Vietnam in the 1960s did not know what to think about self-immolation. Was this truly a nonviolent protest? Was it worship or suicide?”

“There’s a relationship that I can’t quite pin down between Nhat Chi Mai’s body and the burning bush. Here body’s being consumed and the bush’s refusal to be consumed – both command attention.

“It is not just attention to the truth about ourselves that God’s flame can direct. God’s flame also wants to focus our attention on the world.... Before you can act, first you have to see.” In a way, it can be argued that prayer is not productive. Prayer does not get God to change an immigration policy or to stop a war. It is not a means to an end. And yet, I know that my own halting history of prayer, that engaging various forms of prayer is forming me into a person with the capacity to attend to God and to God’s world.

As we move into a short time of reflection, I have a few questions for you to consider as we conclude this sermon series:

What sustains your spiritual fire?

How is God’s fire regenerative in your spiritual life?

How is God captivating your attention?

What situation in your life or in the world is God calling your attention to?