

Fire

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on September 25, 2022, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.
Scripture: Exodus 3:1-6
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I distinctly remember the first time I sensed real fear and anxiety in one of my parents. I was about seven or eight years old, and a wildfire was rushing up Mount San Miguel just 8 miles from our home in San Diego County. I remember the sky raining ash during the day, and I remember getting up on the roof at night and watching the flames tear up the mountain. I remember my mother being anxious and fluttery and asking my dad, “Do we need to pack up our bags? Should we pack the car and get ready to go? Do I need to gather our important papers?” My dad, almost always calm in a crisis, said, “No, we don’t need to leave. The fire is not going to come this way.” He was right, but he did hose down the cedar shakes of our roof with water. Just in case.

Of the four elements that we have been exploring during this Season of Creation, fire is perhaps the one we most fear. It is certainly one prominently on our minds, as we live through this time of drought and climate change here in California. And really, all four of the elements are dangerous, aren’t they? Last month, when I preached about water and its life-giving properties, in the back of my mind was the fact that one third of the country of Pakistan was under water from devastating floods. Just this week hurricane Fiona with its raging winds and copious rains pummeled Puerto Rico—and is now punishing the Canadian Maritime provinces with wind and water. Last weekend, as I preached about the earth and the wilderness, Taiwan was recovering from a 6.8 magnitude earthquake. All the elements contain within them the power of both creation and destruction. Creation and destruction are held in tension, always, and somehow, we must find the sacred in both.

The word *fire* appears in the Bible over 600 times—and that doesn’t even include related words, such as *burn*, *burning*, *fiery*, or *flame*. Unfortunately, quite often fire appears as imagery of punishment, in the form of fire from God above raining down on the people. But there are some notable exceptions, when fire indicates the protective presence of God. For example, in the Book of Daniel, the three young men Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are cast by Nebuchadnezzar into the fiery furnace as punishment for their faith, but they are not consumed by the flames, because of God’s presence. As the Israelites wander in the desert after leaving Egypt, God is present, leading them in the form of a fiery pillar at night. When Elijah tests the priests of the Baal, God responds by creating fire on Elijah’s altar, while the altar of Baal remains empty. In the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit appears on Pentecost as tongues of flame hovering over the heads of all those who were gathered.

In our scripture today, God’s presence is seen in the fire of a bush that burns, but is not consumed. The burning bush seems to have been created to get Moses’ attention. I always wonder what would’ve happened if Moses had not noticed the bush, or had just decided to walk on by and not stop to listen and learn. What conflagration would God have had to create if Moses had not paid attention to the burning bush?

When Moses does notice, and comes closer to investigate, God speaks to him and tells him to take off his sandals, because the ground he's standing on is holy ground. God is present not just in the burning bush that is not consumed, but in the very ground that Moses walks on. Fire called Moses to pay attention and find the presence of the sacred.

Fire makes us pay attention, doesn't it? Whether it is the mesmerizing movement of a candle flame, the warm and snapping glow of a campfire, or the raging of a wildfire, fire gets our attention. It also activates our fear and anxiety, as it did with my mother so many years ago. Our fear and anxiety around fire is one of the reasons for the way we have approached the management of fire since European settlers first arrived on this continent several hundred years ago. Particularly in the last century or so, our approach to wildfires was to view them as wholly destructive, and to put them out as soon as possible, and not let them burn. We are now paying the price for our fear. But it wasn't always so.

If those European colonists had paid close attention to the forests they encountered when they set foot on this continent, they would have realized that the indigenous peoples of this land had been harnessing the creative power of fire for eons. Indigenous peoples knew something that the settlers did not: that fire was not merely beneficial to the health of the forest—it was necessary.

Take for example the sequoias, which I mentioned in my sermon last week. Scientists tell us that sequoias evolved with fire. The bark of a mature sequoia is thick and spongy, and it protects the tree from the worst of a fire. If you visit the sequoias, and I hope you do if you have never been there, you will see ancient trees with fire scars and see that the thick bark is beginning to grow over the scar until one day it will be totally covered and protected. The trees are so tall that the lowest branches on a mature sequoia are high above most flames of the average forest fire. Sequoia seeds do not germinate in places where the ground has a lot of leaf litter and debris. They only germinate on bare ground—ground that has been scoured by fire.

For a sequoia fire is a necessary, generative aspect of creation. Unfortunately, the fires we are seeing in these days of climate change are not like most fires. Because of the long drought, trees are more dried out, and because we have suppressed fire for more than 100 years, there is an overabundance of fuel for fires to consume. These factors combine to create fires of unprecedented heat and intensity that even a mature sequoia cannot withstand.

But the tide is turning. Science projects throughout the west are beginning to prove what indigenous peoples have always known—that deliberately-set fires, under the right conditions, can protect forests from destruction and allow forest ecosystem to flourish.

U.C. Berkeley's Blodgett Forest Research Station, which is about 12 miles due east of Auburn, California, has been researching the effects of prescribed burns on the forest. At Blodgett, "controlled, low-intensity fires rob wildfires of the small trees, dead vegetation and other fuels that can turn them into catastrophic infernos. [...]. Researchers are using high-tech tools to figure out how we can burn more safely and effectively as climate change makes prescribed burning

trickier.”¹ Blodgett just happens to be in the burn zone of this year’s largest California wildfire, the Mosquito Fire. Researchers got to see first-hand the effects of a wildfire on this piece of land which, except for the prescribed burns of the researchers, hasn’t burned in over a century.

Robert York, a U.C. Berkeley forest ecologist who lives most of the year at the research station, reentered the Blodgett forest after the Mosquito Fire had passed through last week:

In areas where he and his colleagues hadn’t used prescribed fire and other methods to thin out the flammable brush, he saw death and devastation everywhere. The fire racing across the ground had been intense enough to ignite the treetops. “When I look up into the canopy, it’s just completely black, and the crowns are completely charred,” York said. But the 250 acres or so where prescribed burns had taken place were largely spared the worst, he said. Some large trees were still killed along the edge of this area. But in other spots, he said, the blaze appeared to have moderated quickly.²

In another part of the state, similar work is being done by the indigenous tribes in the mid-Klamath region in far Northern California. But for the people of the Yurok, Karuk and Hupa tribes, prescribed burning is not just scientific—it’s cultural. It’s about “reclaiming a way of life [that was] violently suppressed with the arrival of white settlers in the 1800s.”³

In addition to having their land seized and being forced onto reservations and into Indian schools, the tribes’:

hunter-gatherer lifestyle was devastated by prohibitions on fire that tribes had used for thousands of years to treat the landscape. [Fire] enriched the land with berries, medicinal herbs and tan oak acorns while killing bugs. It opened browsing space for deer and elk. It let more rainwater reach streams, boosting salmon numbers. It spurred hazelnut stems and bear grass used for intricate baskets and ceremonial regalia. Now, descendants of those who quietly kept the old ways alive are practicing them openly, creating “good fire.”

“Fire is a tool left by the Creator to restore our environment and the health of our people,” [says Elizabeth] Azzuz, [who is the] board secretary for the Cultural Fire Management Council, which promotes burning on ancestral Yurok lands. “Fire is life for us.”⁴

¹ Raymond Zhong, “California’s Largest 2022 Wildfire Puts U.C. Research to the Test,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/us/california-wildfire-research.html>. Accessed September 22, 2022.

² Ibid.

³ John Flesher, “For Tribes, ‘Good Fire’ Is a Key to Restoring Nature and People,” *AP News*, October 28, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/science-business-forests-california-native-americans-eb2f25b2a932f707d4526bffb6cecf3e>. Accessed September 22, 2022.

⁴ Ibid.

Friends, may we learn what our indigenous siblings have known all along—that in fire, we experience the creative power of the sacred, held always in tension with its destructive capabilities. May we, like Moses, learn to stop and pay attention to the voice of God in the burning bush. And may we always know that, no matter where we are, we are standing on holy ground. Amen.