Grounded: Fire

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 21, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.
Scriptures: Exodus 3:1-17 and Exodus 13:17, 21-22

The earth can quake, and volcanos can spew lava. The waters can flood and dry out. The air can blow over trees and make windows pop out of skyscrapers. Still, the most powerful of the classic four elements is, in my psyche, fire. Fires, for me at least, are powerful not only because wildfire can be so destructive. Fire can be constructive, too, and I see power in that.

Growing up, summer lasted until Labor Day. School always started two days later. Though it was years ago – a decade, perhaps more – I still have a vivid memory of taking some summer vacation in August that spilled over into September. I was staying at my father's cabin in New Hampshire, and the August weather was beautiful. And then we got to Labor Day weekend, and it was as if someone flipped a switch on Sunday night – or, technically, in the wee hours of Monday morning. The temperature dropped and I got so cold I woke up. I couldn't get back to sleep, so at around 3:00 a.m., I got out of bed, put on my shoes and a jacket, and went out to the wood pile. I knew the only way I was going to get warm was to get a fire going in the woodburning stove.

Once I the fire was lit and burning well, I flattened out the futon sofa, grabbed the bedding from my bed in what we still affectionately call "the bunk room" (even though the three bunk-beds from our childhood went to the town dump long, long ago), and successfully fell back asleep. I don't think I would have frozen to death, but I wouldn't have slept without the constructive power of fire.

Ever since the beginning of the industrial revolution, we've been burning stuff to make power. First it was coal to generate steam to run pumps and trains. It enabled us to move mills away from streams and rivers where we had harnessed the power of water. It wasn't long before we were burning coal to generate steam to turn turbines to generate electricity. And then we started using oil and fossil gas.

The four-stroke internal combustion engine was created in 1875, about the same time as we started using fossil fuels for generating electricity.[1] The thing that made internal combustion engines so wonderful was the combination of power and ease of operation. And that's all because of the amount of energy packed into gasoline, especially compared to its volume and mass.

"Steam-powered tractors had already existed for a while, but internal combustion meant that tractors could remain powerful while being even easier to operate. This meant that farmers could get more work done in the same amount of time, allowing them to grow more food more easily.

[1] Tobias Holm, "The History of the Internal Combustion Engine," *TechHistorian*, https://techhistorian.com/history-of-internal-combustion-engine/ (accessed 20 September 2025).

"As a result, this meant that food costs in developed nations went way down, and the abundance of food meant that countries could more easily export their own food to other countries where such food would be in high demand. Powerful and efficient engines made this food and other resources easier to transport to other places too."[2]

Fire is powerful and transformative. Is there any wonder that, when he saw a bush ablaze without burning up that Moses decided he had to check it out? Adam White points out, "When God calls to Moses in the wilderness, Moses is alone. He's out in the fields living off the land. Moses would have needed fire for survival as a wilderness shepherd; he would have been acquainted with the risk of brush fires. He would have been on the lookout for wildfire for the sake of his wellbeing and the sake of the flock entrusted to his care. When God calls, God does so out of the fire, 'There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush."[3]

White calls the burning bush a "Divine ploy" to get Moses' attention. Once God gets Moses' attention, God can give Moses his mission. But unlike an episode of *Mission: Impossible*, Moses doesn't simply accept his mission. First, he has to have a little discussion with God. I love that about so many characters in the Hebrew scriptures. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Jonah – all kinds of people bargain with God, negotiate, get a little something out of the deal.

One of the things that Moses gets out of his negotiations with God is a name to call God. It's a bit of a cryptic name. Four letters in the Hebrew. There are no vowels in Hebrew, so the name is four consonants: YHWH. It seems to be related to the verb, "to be." The New Revised Standard Version updated edition translates it "I AM WHO I AM." I've heard some argue that "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE" might be a better translation.

White says that this name gives him "the sense that the gift of God's name to Moses bears some similarity to the story of Prometheus, the Greek god who gifted humanity fire. A risk is taken in the giving of a powerful gift. This gift can be used well or poorly. It can give life or destroy it.

"From the moment the fiery gift of God's name is entrusted to Moses there is a liability opened-up: this God's name and presence may be used for warmth, and light, and life, or it may be used in vain … to consume or destroy."[4]

I think there's wisdom in this insight, especially in what is says about using God's name in vain. You might remember that one of the Ten Commandments is not to use God's name in vain. The true power of that commandment has been diminished by the assumption that we use God's name in vain by saying something like, "God damn." The truly vain use of God's name happens is when we consume or destroy other people or creation like a wildfire and think that we're doing it on God's behalf, that we're doing in in God's name.

Fire signifies presence and power. It sustains and consumes.

---

[2] *Ibid*.
[3] Adam White, "If I Were Preaching," part of the *Grounded In Creation* worship series resources from Church Anew.
[4] *Ibid*.

In his new book, *Here Comes the Sun*, Bill McKibben claims, "Fire defines us."[5] He may be right. For 4.6 billion years, a great gaseous ball of fire, some 93 million miles away, has burned continuously, allowing life on earth to evolve. Our planet is in the sweet spot of our solar system, in the Goldilocks zone. Any closer to the sun and the water that sustains life on earth would evaporate. Any farther away and it would freeze solid, creating a frozen wasteland.

Early humans encountered wildfires, probably set by lightning. "At some point those ancestors learned to control flame, and eventually to produce it," writes McKibben, "and with that it became possible to move away from the equator, and to cast light deep into caves, to harden spear points and to burn off grasslands. Above all it became possible to cook – applying fire to food means that some of the processes of digestion can be performed outside the body. This ability is reflected in our very form – it's why we have relatively small guts and teeth. Cooking made meat much easier to digest, giving us a calorie-dense diet that supported the evolution of a much larger brain."[6]

Did you know that cooking is universal to our species? No explorer has ever stumbled across a human society that didn't cook.[7] Fire has made us who we are.

And, for the past 200 years or so, fire has been making it harder and harder to be who we are. The carbon we release, carbon that was once been safely sequestered underground that we release when we burn fossil fuels is trapping heat, raising the earth's temperature, and changing the very climate on which humans have built civilization. To quote Jane Ellen Nickell, "We are so in love with burning things that we ignore the great ball of fire in the middle of our solar system."[8]

For millennia, all kinds of cultures "worshipped the Sun as a god, supreme in power, wisdom, and justice, making a daily pass across the sky to survey his kingdom. From Egypt and India to Mexico and Peru, sun religions honored the great orb's unsurpassed power that provided light, warmth, and life itself….

"After 4.6 billion years, the Sun's fire is undimmed, but we reject it, preferring the fire of our own making."[9]

Oh, but there's some good news. I got permission to share this movie trailer[10] that introduces this good news is.

According to the global energy think tank Ember, "The electrotech revolution is the most profound transformation of the energy system since the shift from biomass to fossil fuels in the 18th century. As electrotech costs fall and exponential growth continues, a

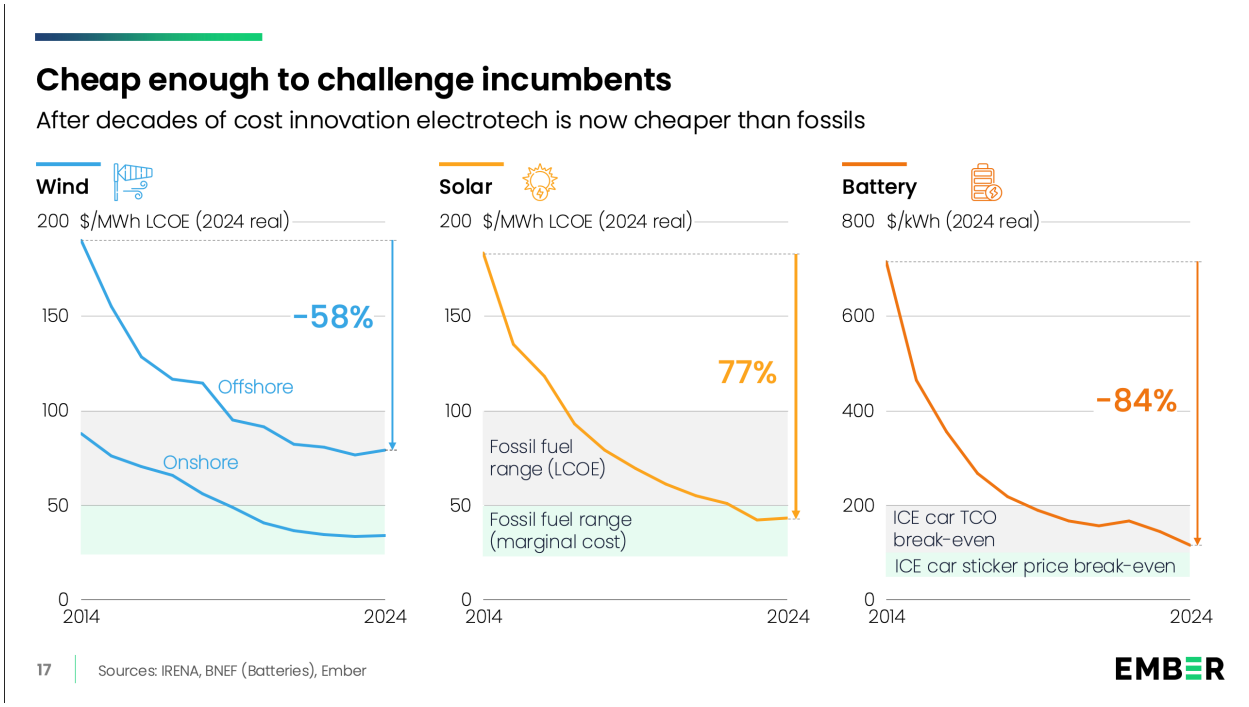
---

[5] Bill McKibben, *Here Comes the Sun* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2025), 19.
[6] *Ibid*, 14.
[7] *Ibid*, 14.
[8] Jane Ellen Nickell, "Great Ball of Fire," *Th!rd Act*, https://thirdact.org/faith/2025/08/31/great-ball-of-fire/ (posted 31 August 2025; accessed 17 September 2025).
[9] *Ibid*.
[10] You can currently access the trailer on Blue Sky in the post from Sun Day at https://bsky.app/profile/sundayofaction.bsky.social/post/3lz247wu2ck2u (posted 17 September 2025).

century of evolution is converging into a decade of revolution."[11] When Ember talks about "electrotech," they're talking about the technologically enhanced ways the world generates, uses, and moves electrons. That is, they're talking about the "renewable [electricity] supply from solar and wind; [the] electricity demand from electric vehicles (EVs) and heat pumps; and [the] connections from batteries and digitalization."[12]

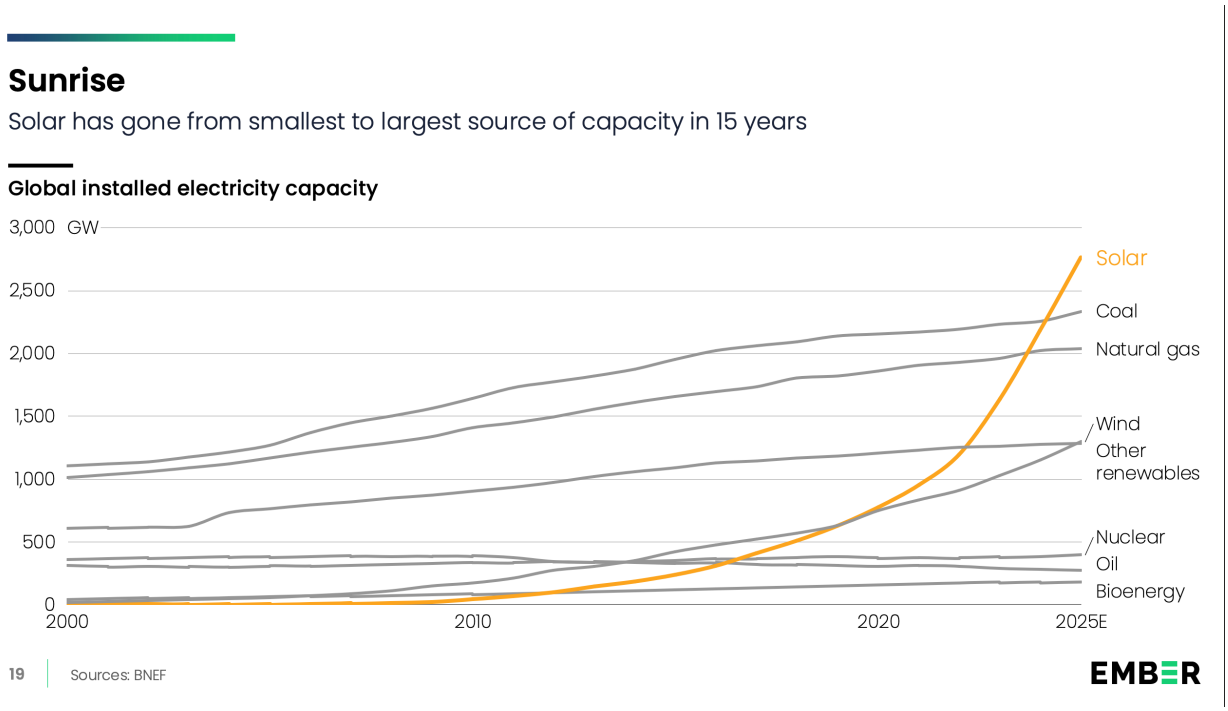
Last week, Ember released a new report and a slide deck of 121 slides. I'm not going to share them all. In fact, I'm going to limit myself to three graphs.

First, this graph shows how costs for wind and solar energy generation of dropped and how the cost of batteries has dropped over the past 10 years (2014-2024).[13] In most places, solar electric generation (and wind is indirect solar energy) is competitive with or is less expensive than fossil fuel electric generation. Meanwhile, battery costs have dropped as batteries have become more efficient.

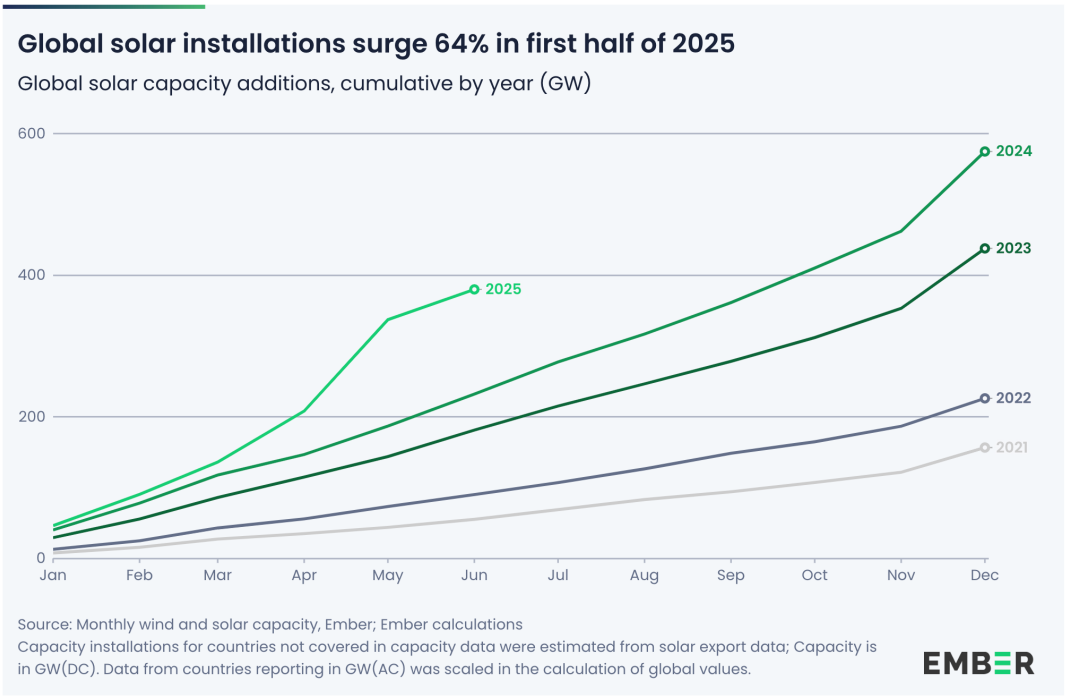


Second, this graph shows how, from 2000 to today, solar has gone from the smallest to the largest source of electricity generation in the world.[14] Think about that for a moment. Worldwide, solar energy generation can do more to meet our energy need than any other source of electricity.

[11] Kingsmill Bond, *et al*, "The Electrotech Revolution," *Ember*, https://ember-energy.org/latest-insights/the-electrotech-revolution/ (posted 16 September 2025; accessed 20 September 2025).
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] From the slide deck at *Ibid*.
[14] From the slide deck at *Ibid*.



Third, this graph shows the surge in cumulative solar capacity installation globally, year over year.[15] The amount of solar energy generation being added worldwide is mind boggling. That orb of burning gas can meet our energy needs.



[15] "Global solar installations surge 64% in first half of 2025," *Ember*, https://ember-energy.org/latest-updates/global-solar-installations-surge-64-in-first-half-of-2025/ (posted 2 September 2025; accessed 20 September 2025).

I know this about myself: One of the places I find it easiest to sit in stillness and quiet is around a campfire or a fire in the fireplace. Maybe, whether we consciously recognize it or not, the fire has something to say. And maybe, in the depths of our being, we're eager to listen. Once upon a time, it might have called a prophet to lead a people to freedom. Once upon a time, it might have helped that people find their way in the wilderness. Once upon a time, it might have helped us know who we are.

Today, that campfire might be telling us to look to the sky, to at gaseous ball of fire that provides more than enough energy to the earth for us humans, for all plant life, for all animal life. Maybe the campfire is telling us to get our power from a fire that burns in the sky and that burns in our souls.

Amen.