

Fight Fire With Fire

By John Blossom
25 August 2013

Good Morning.

I am so glad to be here again as your worship leader and I thank your Pastor Florence for the opportunity. I don't think that it's to the point that my being here has become a habit, but so far I have been here in the ice of winter, the flowers of spring and now in the warmth of summer. I love this congregation and I enjoy coming here, now from my family's new home in Guilford. Lots has happened since last I was here, both in our own lives and in the world. Governments have risen and fallen, many famous people have done likewise. People have been born, and some have died. We still all remember the fallen

children and teachers in Sandy Hook, gone not even a year ago. And more recently, we may recall nineteen courageous firefighters in Prescott, Arizona who lost their lives battling a massive wildfire that turned on them and consumed them before they could escape.

This tragedy in Prescott seems to have struck a deep chord in a lot of people, certainly because of the horrible loss of these brave people but also perhaps because fire is such a powerful and basic force in our lives. We need fire to heat our homes, to cook our food, to drive our cars, to make useful things. And yet we're never quite at peace with its power. Fire can turn on us at the least moment's notice - and then there is pain, damage and loss. When I visit the National September 11 Memorial in New York City and contemplate the names of my lost friends and

colleagues, my knowing that all that is left of them is burnt ashes in a landfill certainly adds to the powerful grief that I feel when I reflect on their sudden passing.

So when we read about fire in the Bible and we find fire associated with the power of God, we are encountering a difficult conjunction, a powerful force that we desire, yet a force that is fundamentally frightening. The God who we desire and who desires us is a force to be reckoned with. Today's reading from a letter to the Hebrews, the early Jewish followers of Jesus who had faced persecution, torture and even death because of their new faith, reminds us that the Jewish tradition is founded on a God of fire, a God who spoke to Moses from a burning bush, a God who went before the people of Israel fleeing from Pharaoh in a pillar of fire and smoke, a God who spoke from atop

Mount Sinai in the midst of a fiery storm that terrified the people of Israel. Even Moses, the humble man who God trusted to lead them, was trembling with fear in the fiery presence of the almighty Creator of heaven and earth.

Yet this same God calls us to be intimate with him; he calls us to be touched by him; he calls us in the still of the night by our name. When the prophet Jeremiah encountered God as a young man in today's Old Testament reading, God lets Jeremiah know that he was known by God even before he was in the most intimate place where people are joined together - a mother's womb, the place from which we are taken by God himself into the world, as today's Psalm reminds us. God gives Jeremiah the gift of prophetic words by touching Jeremiah's mouth. How many people actually touch us in our mouth with

their finger - much less God himself! In today's reading from Luke, Jesus goes out of his way during his teaching on the sabbath day to touch a woman crippled for eighteen years. Now, in Jesus' time, it was very inappropriate for a man to touch a woman stranger, especially in a holy place like a synagogue. But at a time when illness was considered a sign of God's condemnation of a person, touching a sick woman in a synagogue would have been completely off the charts of appropriate behavior. Yet here was the Son of God, touching and healing the untouchable. The God of fire is the also the God who touches us as no one in this world can touch us.

How do we resolve these two aspects of God? It's not always an easy thing. We talk about a God of fire as a fearsome force, and then we want him to touch us! And as

Christians, our relationship with the God of fire gets even more intimate. At the end of today's reading from Hebrews, the writer tells us that our God is a consuming fire. A consuming fire! My goodness, if we're hanging out with this God, it sounds like we'll be burnt to a crisp!

Where is the bridge that helps us to leap across this divide between a God of fire and a God of intimacy? The writer of Hebrews has the answer to this question, I think, but let's first remember that there is fire, and then, there is fire. That is, to say, there is fire that we fear, and there is fire that we love. Or, to put it another way, there are two basic emotions at work in our lives: fear, and love. We understand pretty well what it is to have fear and love in a worldly sense. With God, it gets a little more complicated. Proverbs 9:10 reminds us that "The fear of the LORD is

the beginning of wisdom.” That word “fear” in this context is a carry-over from early English - in modern English we’d be more likely to say “Awesome respect for the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” When we see a fire burning, we respect its power - and we act accordingly, because we know that we’re vulnerable in its presence. So it is with God. We understand that we need to take our relationship with such awesome power very seriously.

For the fires of God-like love, though, God encourages us to put aside our reserved attitudes and to accept that vulnerability is an important strength in relationships based on spiritual love. To experience God-like love we have to accept that the boundaries that we’d normally respect between ourselves, others and God are worth burning. So our fears want us to respect things

that could destroy us, but Godly love in us wants us to risk putting aside our fears of destruction and loss in order to break through our isolation into a fiery God-like intimacy with those who are worth loving.

Jesus has given us this second fire, this fire of spiritual love, as no one on earth ever could. As the Son of God, he calls us to respect the Creator who loved us enough to give us life on this earth, but to recognize that as God's creations, we have nothing to fear in life of a worldly kind, if we accept God's love for us in Christ.

Everything worldly in Jesus' life turned to dust; he lost his very life in pain and humiliation upon the cross, and he did so willingly, because he was the first to trust that although the worldly fires of sin and death may destroy his presence on earth, this world would never

stand between him and God, because God had forged his living word of perfect love, made flesh in Jesus the Christ, in the fires of eternal life before this world was ever born. It is this God who lives in us through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the fires of God's perfect love burning in our hearts through faith in Jesus Christ. And through the fire of this Holy Spirit burning in us together - the awesome fire of love that comes from God and God alone - we need not fear anything on the face of this planet that may consume us in flames, for God's work in us will have taken our spirit into a new world while we still walk in this world.

It is this world that Jesus is leading us to in the spirit of God's love - what the writer of Hebrews calls "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly

of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” And while this is the world to come to us after life, Hebrews says that we “have come” to this world already. When we live lives in the fire of God’s loving spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, the kingdom of heaven can burn brightly our hearts now - and forever.

And how we need that fire in our hearts today. We too live in a world that is burning in its brokenness and its lostness for healing, for hope, for salvation, for peace, for justice. We live in a world that cries out for the fires of God’s love to burn in you and me. The world is waiting for you and for me to accept Christ as our savior completely and to fight fire with fire. May it be so in our hearts today, now, and forever. Amen.