

WEEK 8: Fire

This is week two in our three-part series on the use of natural elements as metaphors in the Bible. This week we are looking at fire. Just like water, fire is used across the entire spectrum of metaphors from an association to Almighty God as well as to our modern views of Satan. It is used to protect as well as to destroy, and to symbolize great power as well as great suffering.

I am sure that most of us at some point in our lives have sat around a fire, whether it be a campfire in the woods, a bonfire on the beach or a firepit in our backyard. It seems like there are always three stages to any fire that I have either sat around or started. First, there is the catch – that moment when the fire transfers from the kindling to the wood, and we start to see the fire build. The flames dance as they move from one piece of wood to the other until you reach the second stage – the blaze. Here the light, heat and accompanying smoke are intense. It is usually at this point that you try to find a strategically placed position around the fire so that you are not downwind, in the direction of the smoke! Very intense, this moment is usually short-lived unless the fire is unbounded. Maintaining a blaze takes in a contained space takes work. However, unconstrained it can cause massive devastation and destruction. The third stage is when it settles to a glow. The flames are no longer dancing but the heat is consistently intense. While this is not the time of greatest warmth, it is the time we would use to start cooking. Personally speaking, this is the best time to roast marshmallows, but I know there are some out there who can't wait, who like their marshmallows to be more of a flaming torch than golden brown on the outside and soft in the middle.

Now that you all probably want a s'more, you can probably get why fire is used metaphorically in so many aspects of our lives, especially spiritually. We are attracted by the light, given comfort and warmth in the blaze, and sustained in the glow. This week we will look at all of this as we explore fire and its many uses in the scripture.

Monday

Exodus 3:1-6

Tuesday

Matthew 3:11
Acts 2:1-4

Wednesday

Genesis 8:18-21
Genesis 22:1-2; 10-14
Exodus 18:8-12

Thursday

Genesis 19:24-28
Isaiah 30:30
Isaiah 66:15

Friday

Psalms 139:8
Matthew 18:19
Luke 16:19-24

Monday

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.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3:1-6)

We start this week with the passage that we might all pick if I were to ask you when you first heard mention of fire in the Bible. (The actual first mention of fire in the Bible is not a very uplifting story, so we will get to that one later!) In this passage, we join Moses later in his life after he has fled Egypt because he murdered an Egyptian task master. Moses is married and working for his father-in-law in the family business of sheep herding. One day, no different from the previous ones before, he is out tending his sheep and he gets close to the mountain of God. It is called Horeb here, but it was also known by another name that may be more familiar – Mount Sinai. He will return there some years later to receive the Ten Commandments.

Back then it was believed that God resided on top of this mountain. There are several references in the text to lightening and thunder that surrounded the mountain top and it was a very holy place. After the Children of Israel built the Ark of Covenant, it was believed that God traveled in the Ark guiding the people, and would subsequently inhabit a sacred space in the Tabernacle during the wilderness, then in the Temple once they settled in the Promised Land.

God speaks to Moses as He had spoken to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs before him (Abraham, Sarah, Rebekah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph) but God reveals Himself in the form of a burning bush. This is the first time that the Hebrew Bible mentions God taking shape. Notice the words used: "the bush was blazing but was not consumed." This was not a glowing bush that we sometimes see depicted in movies. It was ablaze, flames dancing and moving as the words of the Almighty were heard by Moses. It is in this scene that God tells Moses His name, a name that is so holy that devout Jews will not say it or write it. When it was later transcribed into text, it was done so without vowel markings so that the word was not complete, and only after the pen, the ink and the scribe had gone through ritualistic cleansing.

This image of the dancing flames of the burning bush has great symbolic meaning in Jewish prayer life. If you have been to a synagogue or seen video of people during prayer you will notice the people often swaying. It is not like the orderly ritual of bowing and kneeling of Islamic prayer. It is spontaneous and without pattern. It is referred to shuckling which is a Yiddish word meaning "to shake." This kinesthetic practice is believed to have gone back to the time of the Babylonian Exile and was a practice in which you would emulate the random and flowing movement of the flame that appeared to Moses and the flame that dances in the light of the candle by which you celebrate Shabbat. That random swaying is a

way of putting your mind and soul in communion with Almighty God as She speaks, revealing to you the mysteries of the words of the Torah and Her call for you. Next time you pray, light a candle and sway with the movement of the flame and let the voice of God speak to you.

Peace (Shalom)

Tuesday

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3:11)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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)

Today we shift from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament to talk about the image of God appearing as fire. The first passage is from the baptism of Jesus and again is a pretty familiar story. This story is the first one that is common to all four of the gospels. John the Baptist baptizes Jesus and afterwards we have the beautiful scene of the heavens parting and God speaking those familiar words “This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!” We get so caught up in that image that we read right over something John said: Jesus is going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Hebrew for “Holy Spirit” is loosely translated as the breath of holiness and that sounds cool, but hold on a minute – baptize with fire? What is that supposed to mean? We get that it is a metaphor. I mean, it is impossible to baptize someone with fire unless we are all meant to have a Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego experience (see Daniel 3) but I seriously doubt it. Plus, the logistics of having a fiery furnace installed next to the baptismal font would be hard to pull off, not to mention a little bit of a mood killer during Sunday morning worship.

What does it mean? That reference to fire is left out of two accounts of this story. The gospels of Mark and John don't mention it, but they all have a piece of John the Baptist's preceding sermon where he is preaching repentance and reference to a verse in Old Testament (Malachi 4:1) that talks of the unrighteous burning. While that point is in all four gospels, it also is the first example of how the gospel writers all chose to focus on slightly different aspect of Jesus' ministry.

No doubt, John the Baptist was simple in his message. He was like the prophets of the Old Testament – “you people are wicked, repent or else!” Jesus' ministry, as we learn throughout the rest of the New Testament, is a bit more complex, nuanced with double and hidden meanings. Is Jesus coming with a message of judgement and wrath, the messiah who will be a warrior and defeat the Romans and free the Jews, or was there something else?

Since I am not ending the writing for today right here, there must be something else. ;-) We know from last week that baptism is an act of purification and that is our clue. In the Old Testament book of Numbers, chapter 31, there is mention of a ritual of purification that went beyond that of water. It was one of fire, and it was done to cleanse and purify weapons after battle. It is the same fire that we see referenced in the text as the “refiner’s fire” (Malachi 3) that will help turn swords into plow shears – instruments of violence into instruments of peace.

Our second passage from the book of Acts gives more insight into this use of fire and its association with the Holy Spirit. This is a scene where the apostles are gathered together after Jesus’ ascension and his promise that he would send the Holy Spirit to guide them. This Spirit enters the room and upon descending on them takes the form of divided tongues of fire over each of their heads. This is the final purification of the apostles and the images that emerge in the following chapters are of very different men that we read about in the Gospels. Peter becomes the rock Jesus spoke of, we hear of the strength of John and of Philip, and then the accounts of the Apostle Paul. The beautiful thing about all of this is that we read the Holy Spirit was not just given to the Apostles that night in the upper room. The promise of the New Testament is that the same Spirit, that same refining fire of purification is given to all of us!

Peace (Shalom)

Wednesday

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. (Genesis 8:20-21)

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’ ...

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’ (Genesis 22:1-2, 10-14).

Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel’s sake, all the hardship that had beset them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in delivering them from the Egyptians. Jethro said, ‘Blessed be the

Lord, who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians, when they dealt arrogantly with them.'And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt-offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God. (Exodus 18:8-12)

There were many different types of sacrifices offered by the Children of Israel to God. Many of those offerings required an animal to be sacrificed and then for it to be placed on an altar and burned. One specific offering, the burnt offering (olam in Hebrew), was the best known and represented a total submission to God. This offering was to be entirely consumed by fire, whereas others include partaking of the parts of the animal as food for those offering the sacrifice, such that it became a sacred act as well as an act of hospitality. The Hebrew root of olam means "that which goes up," the idea being that the smoke of the offering would rise to the heavens and would be pleasing to God.

The laws of sacrifice were given to Moses on Mount Sinai as recorded in Exodus 20 and detailed in Leviticus chapters 1 through 7, but our passages today come from accounts of burnt offering that were offered to God prior to the giving of the law. Each of these are very powerful and significant moments in the text, giving us a deeper insight into this type of offering. This observance was first used by Noah when he offered a sacrifice to God to seal the promise (covenant) that God would never again destroy the world by Flood. The second observance is the call of Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice representing Abraham's unending faith. The third observance is that of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, making an offering of praise to God for delivering the Children of Israel from the hand of Pharaoh.

In the times of Jesus, Rabbis started teaching that the fire of the burnt offering not only caused the smoke to "go up" to God, but it also gave way to the soul and mind of the one offering the sacrifice to ascend (go up) to be in communion with God. This turned out to be very important and it is doubly so for us today. You see, sacrifices could only be offered at the Temple, so when it was destroyed in 70 AD, sacrifice could no longer be offered. While the fire no longer allows that offering to ascend, burnt offerings were replaced by prayer and acts of kindness. Today, when you pray, remember that you are offering up something sacred, sweet smelling, to God which puts you in communion with Her.

Peace (Shalom)

Thursday

Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord; and he looked down towards Sodom and Gomorrah and towards all the land of the Plain, and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace. (Genesis 19:24-28)

*And the Lord will cause His voice of authority to be heard,
And the descending of His arm to be seen in fierce anger,
And in the flame of a consuming fire
In cloudburst, downpour and hailstones. (Isaiah 30:30)*

*For behold, the Lord will come in fire
And His chariots like the whirlwind,
To render His anger with fury,
And His rebuke with flames of fire. (Isaiah 66:15)*

When I was growing up, a minister who preached about the evils of sin resulting in the eternal damnation of one's soul and therefore the need to repent was one who preached "fire and brimstone." My grandfather was one of those types of preachers, and I can remember people almost running to the altar to pray for forgiveness lest they die that night and burn in the pits of Hell. I can remember myself doing the same only to think later that it was more fear than actual sin that drove me to that prayer of confession. In that way, my belief in God was more of an insurance policy than it was a contract of love.

The origin of the phrase, "fire and brimstone," is from our first scripture passage today and is used in conjunction with the wrath of God that was inflicted on the wicked inhabitants of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 19, the people are destroyed by fire from heaven. The reference to Sodom and Gomorrah is continued throughout the Old and New Testaments as a reminder of the fate of those who turn their backs upon God, and in some churches is still used as the yardstick for wickedness.

The image of fire being associated with the anger of God is used throughout the Hebrew Bible. Our next two passages are from the book of Isaiah and speak of the full fury of God which, in this case, was inflicted on the Children of Israel in response to their continued unfaithfulness. I admit these types of passages are hard – hard to read and hard to understand. How can we believe in such a vengeful God, one who is ready to annihilate and obliterate people including His own chosen people? This was a struggle for early Christians as well. So much so that there was a theory that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament were two very different Gods. This belief ultimately was overturned as the church fathers started to craft what we now know as the doctrine of the Trinity. Still, it

is hard to swallow. How I find some level of understanding in these passages is to remember something Rev. Sarah said in Worship in the House recently: Faith is a series of steps or phases, the second phase being that of Narrative. This phase is dominated by the principles of right versus wrong – good versus evil. The stories of the Old Testament, especially those in the Torah and early prophets, are of a people who are still wrestling with the building of their faith and the need to see forces at play in the universe as black and white. It is helpful for us to remember this when we read these scriptures. We need to remember the audience and where they were at that moment in time, and not just look at the words as a blanket application to our lives today. This will also be an important point for our discussion tomorrow.

Peace (Shalom)

Friday

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. (Psalms 139:8)*

If your eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better to enter into life with one eye than to be cast into a burning hell with two eyes. (Matthew 18:19)

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames. (Luke 16:19-24)

You cannot really have a week about fire and not touch on the subject of Hell. It is a tricky one; not something you hear much about in the PCUSA but when surveyed, most believe not just in a concept of hell but that there is a place known as Hell which is the opposite of Heaven. What is interesting about our view of Hell is how it became what we think of today. The fiery pit of torment is an image that was shaped more by what happened after the books of the Old and New Testaments were compiled than during it.

There is not really a concept of Hell in the Old Testament. Really there is not much of a concept of the afterlife in the ancient practice of Judaism. As we saw yesterday, fire is used to portray destruction and the wrath of God, but there was not some physical place called Hell. For the Children of Israel, punishment was enacted in real-time! There was a place called "Sheol" in the Hebrew Bible and we see it mentioned in our first passage. It was a place where you went when you died but it did not carry a negative connotation. Here, David is writing a psalm to God affirming that there is no place he can go that God would not be there with him. Even after death, God would be with him. That is more than a little problematic to think that God would travel down to Hell!

This concept becomes a little more defined as we move into the New Testament and the words of Jesus, but it was really the early Church fathers of the 1st and 2nd centuries that shaped this concept. Our New Testament passages come from the Gospels and, as such, are attributed to the teachings of Jesus. In them, it appears Jesus is acknowledging the belief that there is a physical place called Hell and furthermore, you want to do everything you can to avoid it even if it means cutting off a part of your own body!

Wherever you find the word "hell," it is traced to either the Greek word, *aidos*, where we get the word Hades and then the word Gehenna. If you remember your Greek mythology, Hades was the god of the underworld. If you go back and read the writings of Homer, instead of watching popular movies, Hades is a benevolent gatekeeper and judge of the dead who sent them either to the beautiful Elysian fields or the torturous abyss of Tartarus. The realm of Hades, therefore, was a neutral place like the Hebrew Sheol, but over time the word itself grew to be synonymous with eternal fire and torture as opposed to a "way-station" on the road to either paradise or destruction. You can thank Dante and his book "The Inferno" for that!

The other word used by Jesus was “Gehenna” which referred to a small valley outside Jerusalem. This was a place of unspeakable evil, a place where idol worship had been practiced and children were thrown into fires during the times of the ancient Kings of Judea and Israel. During the times of Jesus, the site served as a trash heap where fires were kept burning perpetually to dispose of not only debris, but unwanted children and the bodies of the dead. When Jesus refers to Gehenna, he is referring to a place that everyone would have been aware of – a place of pain and terrible atrocities.

In the PCUSA denomination, we hold more to the image of hell used by Jesus as a metaphor – a place where no one would ever find God. Just as Jesus’ preaching that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand (here and now) so too was the burning fires of Gehenna. These were not places you went to as reward or punishment, they were current states of either being with or apart from God. While the early founders of Christianity used it as a tool to scare believers into living a clean and wholesome life, it is much more effective for us to see it as those moments when we feel separated from the love of God. When I feel that begin to overcome me, I hold to what David said that, even though I don’t see it or cannot feel it, God is there with me; when I am walking in that valley of the shadow of death, I see the image of a God who has Her “sleeping bag” in tow ready to sleep right next to me even if my bed is in “Sheol.”

Peace (Shalom)