

July 10, 2016      Pentecost 8

#1, The Element: Fire

Today's worship service is the second in a series focusing on the four elements of Creation: Wind, Fire, Water, and Earth, to expand our understanding of **God** and the Christian life. Today we employ the symbols and metaphors associated with the element of **fire/energy/light**. Fire is often associated with the sun, the compass direction of South and the season of summer. The south is the place of the midday heat, the fullness of the noon day sun. Summer is a time of maximum sun, of fruitfulness and activity. Everything is alive and lush. Walking through a farmer's market in the summer offers a buffet of sights and sounds and smells: sweet berries, glorious greens, bright red tomatoes, buckets of colourful flowers; people of all ages wandering, sampling, sharing.

How many of us have enjoyed sitting around a campfire, watching the flames, sharing stories, on a summer's night? It's something primal, a ritual that has been going on for tens of thousands of years. In the winter, as daylight grows shorter and the nights longer our fireplaces become a place of sanctuary. They offer warmth against the night chill and also a source of reflection and inspiration. I can spend hours watching the flames dance and change.

Scripture is filled with images of light, energy and fire as symbols of the ways in which **God** illuminates our world and our souls.

Moses encounters **God** for the first time in a burning bush, and from those flames **God** speaks to Moses. The *burning yet not consuming* fire generates holy ground around it. It alters the world where it is focused and found.

In the Transfiguration story **Jesus**, *'shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white'* (Mat. 17:2). Fire, illumination and sacred energy again become a window onto the divine. The *burning yet not consuming* light that once appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush now radiates from **Jesus** himself. All is recognized as sacred.

It has often been suggested that **Jesus** did not change but the disciples' perception of **Jesus** changed. They were momentarily able to see **Jesus** as a sacred source of radiance in the world.

As Elisabeth Barret Browning put it:

*"Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
And only he who sees takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

We can see the *burning yet not consuming* fire that is always and already present in the world if we train ourselves to see with more than merely our eyes. The discipline of spiritual practices helps us to cultivate our ability to see below the surface of things, to have a transfigured vision of the world. We often light candles signaling the presence of **God**, the Great Fire *burning yet not consuming* making sacred all things among us.

Reflection:

What radiance awaits you today if you only take time to look and really see?

What is blazing, *burning yet not consuming* in your heart?

Activity 1:

Go for a walk and invite your vision of the world to be transformed, discovering that fire, *burning yet not consuming*, in each person you pass, in each tree and flower and animal.

## Activity 2:

Sometime this summer take a retreat and allow yourself to be governed by daylight and dark, resting when the sun goes down and rising when the sun does.

Take time to watch a sunrise and a sunset, and receive the beauty of the fiery sky.

What do you discover when you allow yourself to live into these ancient rhythms?

## #2, Gospel Lesson

Our little grandson Lochlan continues his wonderful recovery from open heart surgery back in Holy Week. Even when his life was so exhausting and filled with discomfort he would peer out through his suffering with plaintive yet bright little eyes. He wanted so desperately to connect with us. He wanted so desperately to engage life and living. His *heart's desire* was to thrive, to live fully into a healthy life. Now his bright eyes are shining for all to see. His growing, shining inner light thrills my soul and causes me to give thanks to God.

Jesus taught that his followers are to be light for this world. We are to be a flame, lives not hidden but shining forth the good news of receiving and sharing **God's** love and compassion.

Becoming fire, being a light set out for all to see, means letting our passion for life and beauty ignite us in the world. St. Ignatius of Loyola said, ***"We are called to set the whole world on fire with our passion for God."***

We manifest this light as we find ourselves drawn to creative expression because it taps into what is most vital and alive in us.

We are called to let our light shine, whether through art, song, cooking, gardening, or through our work, our relationships, our joie de vivre, our caring presence with others. Becoming fire, letting our light shine means saying yes to life by the very way we live it.

But it is not just each of us shining all on our own. St Ignatius spoke of the deepest desires of our hearts as being planted there by **God**. We've often been taught to mistrust our desires. We struggle with separating wants from needs or recognizing the difference between self-centredness and self-actualization. So, we tend to dim the lights on our deepest desires.

Through Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius developed a retreat that incorporates a set of tools for distinguishing our truest, deepest desires and recognizing them as those that **God** wants passionately lived out in us.

*'What is our heart's desire?'* What ability or activity both grounds us and lifts us passionately to live and contribute for a better tomorrow and a richer today. Sam Keen termed it *'fire in the belly'* for the men's spirituality movement back in the 1990's.

In the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we hear that at Pentecost there appeared to the disciples *"tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them"*. Pentecost in part is a story of the fire of courage being breathed into the early followers of **Jesus** with amazing results. Receiving that courage they engaged their God inspired passions and went on to become a light to the nations.

Now, sometimes our inner fires seem to die down, or fizzle out. At these times, we are often overworked and overcommitted, or undernourished by the things that bring our souls alive. Sometimes the bright light in our eyes just slowly begins to fade away and life feels monotonous not exciting

or worth the effort. We lose touch with the source and energy that feed our God given passions for the world.

So, in these times, at the end of the day take note of what little thing kindled your heart, what little gesture lifted your soul, what made your soul feel alive and overflowing?

The answer often is “*when I did something for someone.*” or “*when I shared my talents, my gifts with others.*” In other words when I let my light shine.

#3,

We live in urban areas where the constant stream of light from artificial sources obscures our vision of the night sky. Vicki and I had the chance to get away into the country over the long weekend. Deep in the darkness we looked up and could clearly see the Milky Way.

Getting away to the country offers such a different experience at night. Gazing up at stars, some similar to our sun, some of even greater magnitude, *burning yet not consuming* from our vantage point, they radiate such immense energy across the galaxy and beyond.

These thousands upon thousands of tiny glittering points evoke awe for a **God** who is vast beyond our imaginings. What is even more amazing, our planet revolving around our star sun has the perfect balance of light energy and atmosphere to sustain life. We exist in the Divine balance, the divine presence of *Burning yet not consuming*.

The stars, those ancient fires in the night sky, were once an important navigational tool. We all know the story of the wise ones following the star to greet **Jesus** at his birth.

While fire is a source of light, life, energy, awe and direction, it can also be a profoundly destructive element. I remember driving in British Columbia through areas that had been destroyed by fire and was saddened by the charred stumps and land. I also remember hearing how park rangers are doing controlled burn offs in some national parks to lower the amount of brush and other potential fuel for fires to ignite. Such controlled burns also replenish the soil allowing new growth to spring up with greater biodiversity.

This parade of destruction and renewal: Death in the midst of life and life in the midst of death is part of the metaphor of fire in our lives.

There are times when it may feel like a fire has raged through our lives, destroying all that we have held dear. The term “Burn out” or the warning about “getting burned,” comes to mind. Times of suffering can also remind us of what is most vital in our lives. We sometimes call this ‘the refiner’s fire.’”

Catherine of Siena wrote somewhat cryptically;

*“You God are a fire that always burns without consuming.  
You are a fire consuming in its heat every compartment  
of the soul’s self-absorbed love.*

The refiner’s fire has long been associated with the Prophets warning that **God** comes as a purifying fire. In the New Testament the burning lake of sulfur in Revelations is also the sea of glass mingled with fire that surrounds **God’s** throne purging our sins and making us fit for eternity.

Sometimes pain can course through us like a wildfire, a consuming heat igniting our nerve endings and emotions. It is precisely this refining fire that can release what is truly precious from the dross, the slag in our lives.

Amazingly, amidst the pain and suffering in life someone reaches out in the right way, at the right time and unexpectedly draws our precious metal to the surface. The refiner's fire usually has already been at work in their lives. The precious metal of compassion refined for extraordinary sharing and caring.

We would never have chosen the fire in the first place, but we would never give up the refinement of our soul that comes from it.

We have prayed for the lands and people caught up in wildfires, most recently for the residents of Fort McMurray Alberta. In the devastation and challenges wildfires bring we hear of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Borrowing from Mother Teresa, this is perhaps the best definition of the Christian life: **Ordinary people fired up to do extraordinary things.**

Let us pray...

### Fire Prayer

Spirit of Fire,

Source of all creative power,

You revealed yourself through the Burning Bush,

the transfiguration of Jesus

and the fiery courage of Pentecost.

Fiery Spirit,

Kindle your Holy Spark within us,

Sear into us your Sacred Passion.

Engulf us with your *burning yet not consuming* presence

until we have become fire,

offering warmth and light to the world.

Spirit of Refining Fire,

Help us to release what no longer serves the common good.

Melt away any resistance:

To your Flame of love burn brightly in us

To your Light of conscious awareness guiding our actions

To your challenge to share our God inspired passion with the world,

That we might discover anew each day this inner fire,

and enter it fully so as to share it completely. Amen.