

Creation 3C FIRE
Peace, Seattle
June 19, 2016
Exodus 3:1-14, Matthew 5:14-16

FIRE

Our theme is FIRE and the sermon this morning is an invitation to use your imagination... We're starting HERE (hands out)...but we're going to get to HERE (heart). Are you ready?

The universe we're coming to know—and groping to understand—is founded upon elements that emerged from stellar cauldrons after the Big Bang.

Without this first generation of stars slow-cooking ingredients in their gigantic spherical crockpots;¹ without them fusing elements in their fiery cores and then—at their deaths—hurling them out into the cosmos, life would not exist.

Some 8 billion years after the Big Bang kicked things off, the debris from a stellar explosion in the outer ring of a medium-sized galaxy began to coalesce and our solar system was born.

Every moment since—5 billion years and counting—the ball of fire we call the SUN has been burning its hydrogen fuel, turning it into heat and light. In fact, the Sun converts 4 million tons of its fuel into light and heat every single second!²

These same cosmic forces that led to the creation of the SUN, led to the formation of the planets of our solar system, including the 3rd rock from the SUN we call home. But the story doesn't stop there.

For were it not for the FURNACE that is Earth's molten core; were it not for the FIRE that fuels Earth's volcanic activity from the inside out, our planet would be a dead planet.

You get the picture...in the great scope of this unfolding Universe: FIRE = LIFE.

But like the three other elemental forces we're celebrating during this month—EARTH, AIR, WATER—FIRE, too, has a split personality.

- FIRE makes life possible. And FIRE takes life away.
- FIRE destroys and FIRE renews.
- FIRE can protect us and FIRE can threaten everything we hold dear.
- Harnessing the FIRE within the atom has put the most destructive potential within our grasp, and as a consequence, we live with the knowledge that the end of human civilization is only the push of a button away.
- FIRE is our greatest friend and our most feared foe.

If you could look at the Earth at night from space (and that's what some of our satellites do) you'd see that something, somewhere, is always burning. These fires generate huge amounts of smoke pollution, release greenhouse gases, and degrade ecosystems.

But they also clear away dead underbrush, helping move ecosystems toward better health. Many of Earth's forests and grasslands, in fact, have co-evolved with fire and require periodic burning in order to reproduce.³

¹ Paul Wallace, *Stars Beneath Us*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) p.121.

² From NASA's Helio website: http://helios.gsfc.nasa.gov/qa_sun.html - consume

³ NASA Observatory Website. http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/GlobalMaps/view.php?d1=MOD14A1_M_FIRE

As our planet gets warmer and warmer, moving natural systems out of balance and causing pervasive, devastating droughts, FIRES in the forests of North America, South America, Australia, Africa, and Eurasia are accelerating the pace of climate change.

FIRE is one complex and multifaceted phenomenon!

Today we celebrate FIRE as a necessary and powerful force in creation, AND ALSO as a metaphor for God's illuminating and transforming Presence.

In our first reading Moses, who'd begun fashioning a new life for himself after running away from Egypt, comes upon a scene on Mt. Horeb that has him baffled—a BUSH appears to burn and yet is not consumed. Curious, Moses finds himself drawn to it, and the encounter which follows changes the trajectory both of his life and the life of God's people.

MOSES, MOSES, calls the Voice, TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES; THE PLACE YOU'RE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND.

Moses, sensing he's in the company of the Creator himself, hides his face, afraid.

In the exchange that follows, Moses hears God's call, and after several failed attempts to talk his way out of the job, he finally acquiesces. But he has one more question:

IF I COME TO THE ISRAELITES AND TELL THEM 'THE GOD OF YOUR ANCESTORS HAS SENT ME TO YOU,' AND THEY ASK ME, 'WHAT IS HIS NAME?' WHAT SHOULD I TELL THEM?

God's answer? I AM WHO I AM . . . I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE...

Which is God's way of saying, **DON'T TRY TO PIN ME DOWN!**

The **FIERY BUSH** in this story is a symbol for illumination; an outward manifestation of an inner reality. And what illuminating truth emerges for Moses from this encounter with the burning bush?

First this: The God who calls Moses has a purpose in mind...this God is not a disinterested or absentee landlord, no, this God cares about what goes on here on Earth.

And second: Every effort to hem God in, to nail God down, to define God, is futile.

One of the fascinating places our family visited during our time in England was Avebury Stone Circle. Avebury is the largest stone circle in the world and older than Stonehenge.

The immense sarsen stone that stands at the north entrance of the circle weighs 100 tons, and is set 10 feet deep in the ground. It is the largest standing stone in the British Isles.

Imagine, then, this stone circle a quarter of a mile in diameter, and then imagine that around the perimeter of this circle is a trench 30 feet deep. Excavating that ditch was no casual undertaking! For 200,000 tons of chalk had to be excavated using stone age tools!

One of the pervasive mysteries about Avebury is why this ditch was built with the OUTER berm higher than the GROUND of the inner stone circle? Surely, it could not have been done for defensive purposes, that is, to keep people OUT. Just what were the builders thinking? It was a question we were invited to ponder.

At the end of the tour, our guide, Mike, asked us to stand in line with the stone circle and face outward. **WHAT DO YOU SEE?** he asked. Our answer: **Only the high berm on the other side of the ditch.**

Avebury, it seems, wasn't designed to keep something OUT—it was designed to keep something IN. But what?

In the minds of the ancient people who built the stone circle these powerful stones had the ability to move under their own power. Perhaps the ditch and berm, then, were constructed to ensure that the stones—and the spiritual power and significance they conveyed—could not leave but must remain.

The God whom Moses, whom we, encounter in the BURNING BUSH will not endure hemming in. The very NAME God reveals to Moses says as much! I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. **God will not be reduced to an answer in a cosmic exam; God is a living, acting presence beyond any words.**⁴

All our language about God, writes Richard Rohr, is metaphor.⁵ The mystery at the heart of the universe is beyond any words we can utter, beyond anything we can name. All we can say is: "IT IS LIKE," which is what Jesus does in his many parables.

Friends, we had nothing to do with the cosmic forces that made the emergence of life in the universe a possibility; had nothing to do with the precise circumstances which led to Earth's formation within the crucial habitable zone around our parent Star—the Sun.

We had nothing to do with the incredibly long, complex, and beleaguered story of Earth's evolutionary history, which, after hundreds of millions of year, finally saw the emergence of intelligent life.

**We had nothing to do with the fact that WE ARE...and yet, WE ARE HERE!
So, my fellow and sister Earthlings, the question is: WHAT ARE WE HERE FOR?**

WHAT ARE WE HERE FOR?

These texts we read as we gather here each week, offer some clues. And what do they say?

- They speak of a Creator who, with love and purpose, brought all this into being, calling it GOOD.
- They speak of a Creator who, out of a desire for relationship, has chosen to become known.
- They speak of the CREATIVE ENERGY OF GOD, the one through whom all things came into being—the WORD—moving from the realm of the infinite to the finite; taking on flesh and blood, bone and sinew in the womb of Mary, becoming one of us.

This WORD, named JESUS, addresses us today, saying, YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

A wee bit of the fire and light that burst forth through God's agency at the very moment this universe was born resides within YOU!

Friends, each of us has within ourselves that God-light placed there by God himself; light that longs to get out—to show itself in the world! What's stopping us?

Now truth be told, our culture, our families, our circumstances, our politics can work to support that process of being light—showing light—and they can conspire to short-circuit the light; keep it hidden. **Lord have mercy, too many examples of light-denying, darkness-dealing acts have been flooding our world with hatred instead of LIGHT these days.**

⁴ Richard Rohrer, *On the Threshold of Transformation. Daily Meditations for Men.* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010) p. 143.

⁵ Ibid.

One year ago we witnessed it at Mother Immanuel Church when nine church members who were searching for light in the Scriptures were gunned down after pleading with their murderer that HATE and FEAR and VIOLENCE were not the solution to what ailed him.

And one a week ago, in Orlando, we witnessed yet again how weapons of darkness inflict pain and suffering, grief, despair and death upon a community.

I stand with those who say solidarity with the victims of these shootings and their families is not enough; that action is required. And among those actions are new laws that aim to keep weapons out of the hands of those whose intentions are only to harm.

My thoughts this weekend are with all the fathers and mothers who, instead of celebrating Father's Day with their children are making arrangements for their funerals.

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD, says Jesus.

What are we here for? We're here for LIGHT! We're here for LOVE!

Sisters and brothers, we had nothing to do with how we came to be on this Earth. But we have everything to do with how we will live today; whether we will show the light, the fire, that, by God's grand design, resides within us. The choice is ours.

Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit theologian and paleontologist, who combined his knowledge of Earth's origins with his faith in a divine Creator, once wrote:

The day will come when, after harnessing...the winds, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, [we] will have discovered fire.⁶

Let us pray...

Jesus, Light of the world, who calls us to be light in a world of darkness, touch us with your Spirit's FIRE; Breathe your breathe, fan the flame, so we will burn bright and clean and hot and pure: your people, one people, a circle of light around the world, for we lift our prayer in holy name. Amen.

⁶ Teilhard de Chardin, "The Evolution of Chastity," in *Toward the Future*, trans. Rene Hague (New York: Harcourt, 1975), 86-87.