

“Fire: A Panorama of the Promised Land”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, July 30, 2023

Texts: Job 28: 1-6 and Psalm 97

“Water might have a biological claim to primacy, but from a cosmological sense, fire was first. The Big Bang theory posits that the universe began, or began its current iteration, when everything that now exists was condensed into the size of a peach pit and had a temperature of over a quadrillion degrees. The energy that was released by that fiery conflagration continues to push the universe out in an ever-accelerating expansion” (Cooperrider, p51). After talking about water for weeks, for just today, we’re going to talk about fire. It’s awkward, in a way, as many in the world are dealing with fire. Wildfires around the world are burning up thousands of acres, and their smoke is causing its own headaches – quite literally – in other parts of the world. At the same time, I think it’s important we talk about fire – both the good and the bad – even amid the fire season that seems out of control.

“Wildfires” according to National Geographic, “can start with a natural occurrence – such as a lightning strike – or a human-made spark. Wind, high temperatures, and little rainfall can all leave trees, shrubs, fallen leaves, and limbs

dried out and primed to fuel a fire. Topography plays a big part too: flames burn uphill faster than they burn downhill.” And they are burning. We know first-hand from the smoke alerts all summer due to many wildfires burning in Canada. We have had smaller fires in Michigan this year. California and other Western states are getting their fair share as well. Many have complained about the smoke here – rightfully so – but how much worse is it where fires are burning?

“Wildfires that burn near communities can become dangerous and even deadly if they grow out of control. For example, the 2018 Camp Fire in Butte County, California destroyed almost the entire town of Paradise; in total, 86 people died” (National Geographic website). We know fires are dangerous. They take lives, cost people their homes, and can ruin many acres of forest land. That doesn’t even mention the smoke, or the release of carbon dioxide into the air. We want the damage to end. Fire suppression becomes our modus operandi around the world. But is everything about fire bad?

“Wildfires are essential to the continued survival of some plant species. For example, some tree cones need to be heated before they open and release their seeds.” Many plants and tree species require fire before their seeds will

germinate. Some plants rely on fire every few years, while others require fire just a few times a century for the species to continue.

“Wildfires also help keep ecosystems healthy. They can kill insects and diseases that harm trees. By clearing scrub and underbrush, fires can make way for new grasses, herbs and shrubs that provide food and habitat for animals and birds” (National Geographic).

Fire can also be an incredibly useful tool. We cook our food, warm our homes, light candles, roast marshmallows, shape metals, and create new energy – all with fire. While fire can be useful, it can also be very dangerous if not handled safely. We all have seen the DNR fire danger signs that tell us if it’s a good idea to have a fire at all. Earlier this summer, we were even warned to be careful of anything that uses fire, including cigarettes, which, when thrown from a window (which isn’t helpful anyway), can start a wildfire that can quickly burn out of control. Out of control fires started by humans are the real problem. “Nearly 85 percent of wildfires originate from human activity.” While fire is useful, we must be careful not to misuse it.

Fire is also at the center of our earth. Our best theory is that the core of the earth is burning at nearly 12,000 degrees Fahrenheit. “Wherever we move on

the earth, this fire within the earth's body creates many of the essential and determinative forms of the landscape, especially when it comes to forms such as mountains." We'll talk more about mountains starting in a couple of weeks, but suffice it to say for now, mountains cover over one quarter of the earth's surface. All of them are formed either by volcanoes themselves, or by the movement of the earth's tectonic plates, caused in large part by the uneven heating and cooling of those plates and their movements.

Fire appears in our Bible at the burning bush (that didn't burn) that began Moses' ministry. Fire is often used to describe how it is that God forms and shapes us and the world we inhabit. Isaiah's lips are burned by hot coal, cleansing them so he can begin to prophesy. Biblically, fire molds us and shapes us, cleans us and refines us. Fire likely appears in some form in every book of our Bible. God leads the people of Israel to freedom as a "pillar of fire".

Biblically, God has everything to do with where fire occurs and what the purpose is behind the fire, whether literal or metaphorical. Whether you believe in the Big Bang theory, or you believe in either biblical account of creation, or some combination, today, responsibility still rests with humanity to a large degree when it comes to fire. In Genesis 1, God gave us "dominion" over creation, which

we misread as meaning to dominate. Dominion, in the context of Genesis, actually means responsibility. We have responsibility for this creation, and it is incumbent upon us to fulfill that responsibility. Richard Rohr rightly reminds us that everything belongs in this world, including fire, but like anything, fire can be both beneficial and dangerous.

Both in the actual lighting of a fire – by accident or on purpose – and by creating the conditions for fire by our participation in climate change, humans have everything to do with how much and what kind of fire we have in the world. Fire can be used to refine, to warm, and to make an amazing experience of faith for those who gather around it. And yet, it can be most destructive when not controlled appropriately.

In short, we must respect fire.

Daniel Cooperrider, whose book we've been reading for some time, ends his chapter on fire (and beginning discussion of mountains) with this vision:

As fire naturally rises, so too do mountains, gifting us when we follow them with long vision, and when we read them from the perspective of the sacred, they gift us with the views we most need, a glimpse of what we must long to see: creation as it is lit up by the light and warmth and ascendancy of a fire – a panorama of the promised land.

Fire can, and should be, a gift to the world. But like any gift, we must use it responsibly.

Amen.