

WHERE GOD IS FOUND: FIRE

Eastertide

Matthew 3:10-11

A Sermon Preached by Four Congregation Members
— Jeanne Powell, Dave Powell, Carol Nelson, and Paul Schafer —
With introduction by Rev. Peter Ilgenfritz
University Congregational Church of Christ
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Scripture:

If there is anything in the Bible with a fiery presence and witness, it is John the Baptist. John's message is clear and blazing: Turn around. Change your life. He is brash. He is direct. He's uncontained. His word is "now". Now is the time to turn to claim your voice and change your life. Hear then these words of fire, of call from John the Baptist from the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 3:10-12

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees;
every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit
is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"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.
His winnowing fork is in his hand,
and he will clear his threshing floor
and will gather his wheat into the granary;
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

For the word of God in Scripture, for the word of God among us, for the word of God within us, thanks be to God

Rev. Peter Ilgenfritz

This season of Eastertide we have been considering how God comes to us in the element of fire. And all week we have seen images and heard stories of 80,000 people fleeing the city of Fort McMurray in Alberta, Canada. Eighty thousand people. There is a time to run from fire. There is a time to run from the *terror* of fire, like this banner inspired by the fires that threatened Holden Village and destroyed thousands of acres of land in Eastern Washington. There is a time to take fire seriously and to run from fire.

And so it is all the more amazing, it is all the more inspiring, when we also see and hear witness from people who turn towards the fire. They go to help, and they go to help because of call. They go because it is truly something of God that calls them to not run away, but to go and respond.

Global warming, climate change, environmental degradation: Overwhelming issues. The future of our planet, the future of us and our families and our children. Overwhelming. And for many of us, yes, an easy time to do like we do with the stories of Fort McMurray if we don't have family and friends there, to read the story, to maybe, yes, offer a prayer, but then turn the page. What a thing it is to have people who, in the midst of the huge and overwhelming call and need of the fires of our lives, go and say, "Yes, that in my own small and particular way I can

respond." Full of gratitude today for Jeanne and Dave and Carol and Paul who share their story, their witness of finding their voice and of going to do what they can do in the light of a great fire.

Prayer:

God, who comes to us as blaze, as fire, as light;
 God, thank you for those who hear and have heeded John's call
 to turn around, to change our lives, to wake up
 and to go and let the fire be a fire in our breath, in our voice, in our lives.
 Thank you for those who witness among us today. — Amen.

Jeanne Powell

I have to confess: I usually try very hard not to speak to groups of people. So today is a stretch for me. I was okay with my five-year-old kindergarten students. They were always so accepting. But lately I've found a need to raise my voice in order to be heard, to add my voice to our collective song. Time is getting short for me. Every day seems to bring new wrinkles and for life as we know it on this planet. The ax is already at the root of the trees. It's time to produce good fruit.

For a long time I've wondered what good fruit looks like. I've agonized over what to do about all the problems I see around me. I've been immobilized by the enormity of the task – until one day, out of desperation, I turned to prayer. What should I do? I asked. Was there something else that I could do with this one wild and precious life I had been given, to quote Mary Oliver. And to my surprise three words floated unbidden into my mind: "Feed my sheep." I recognized that still small voice. And even though I had rarely heard it so clearly, those words of have stayed with me for years now. I've never questioned their source or authenticity. They gave me comfort that I was on the right track when I handed out snack bags for the homeless at the freeway on-ramps or food to the working poor at the Food Bank. And when a friend suggested starting a giving garden in the backyard of the church we were attending. I was delighted. We worked hard along with other members of the church to turn the grassy knoll behind the church into a beautiful organic produce for the local food bank.

But sometimes, even though it seems like our efforts to help are finally bearing fruit, the door is closed. Our church property was sold, and we had to find another place to worship and to garden. A door closed, but another one opened just across the street. The City of Shoreline decided to tear up some old tennis courts and open a community garden. And then a couple of years later they opened another garden in a closed schoolyard just up the street from my house.

I have to say I have given hours of my time and a bit of my treasure to those efforts to grow food for hungry people in Shoreline. I had no idea when I heard those three sweet words "feed my sheep" years ago just what they would mean for my life. I didn't realize that I would meet new friends who loved to garden and wanted to give back to their community just like I did – people who wanted to make a difference. I didn't realize how positively freeing it would be to actually be able to do something about the problem of hunger. Thousands of pounds of fresh organic food have been donated to Hopelink Food Bank from those two Shoreline community gardens. And I have found I am never so close to God as when I am in a garden. All that life and growth, sun and rain, dirt and worms. It's really a miracle how it all works together to produce food for our hungry bodies. I thank God for the lessons in loving that I have learned in a garden.

As Alistair McIntosh reminded us this past winter, each of us has been given just a tiny teaspoon with which to dig a channel for life to flow through. I think he called it microactivism. He also left us with two questions: What are we really here for? And what am I called to be doing? So how have you or will you answer those questions?

Dave Powell

I grew up in the out of doors in Southeast Washington, camping, fishing, hiking, gathering morel mushrooms in the spring and picking huckleberries in the fall. At home I often went to a nearby creek to gather water samples and look at tiny organisms under my microscope. I don't believe I ever put it into words then until I was an adult, but in Nature is where I found God. And over the years Nature has continued to bring me peace and joy.

As a young person I always thought of the life in the mountains and the sea, the trees, water, snow, fish, deer, and everything else as inexhaustible, here forever. As young adults Jeanne and I lived on Bainbridge Island. Our family played in the water, canoed, and dug clams in Eagle Harbor. At the mouth of Eagle Harbor was the Wyckoff plant which converted logs into telephone poles. At Wyckoff I bought Penta, a wood preservative, in five-gallon cans for the old picket fence I was restoring. During that project I dipped several hundred fence staves in the Penta. In 1987 the Wyckoff plant was designated a Super Fund cleanup site because of the contaminants released over the years. I learned that we had been feeding our children clams from a poisoned beach. I learned that the Penta – also known as PCP – which I had sloshed all my hands was toxic and absorbed through the skin. Can you imagine my shock and anger?

I became aware of environmental degradation throughout the U.S. and the world, but I confess I did not do much about it. Oh, we did the personal and family things. We composted and had an organic garden. We continued spending a lot of time in the out of doors and tried to instill a love of nature in our kids. But my social activism had sort of died off years before that, and so I did nothing to push back and change things.

Some years later the tipping point came for me as I learned more about global warming in the early 2000s and also our invasion of Iraq which had serious environmental consequences from burning oil fields and use of uranium bullets. I came to realize that we are facing potentially catastrophic harm to the entire planet and all of its inhabitants: people, animals and plants. I became very concerned about the mess we are leaving for our grandkids. My long-dormant activism was finally rekindled. We participated in anti-war efforts and joined a newly-formed Creation Care group at our former church.

Since then I have been involved in various small ways. We have participated in the anti-coal and oil train campaigns. I have written articles and letters to politicians, helped organize and lead prayer walks, brought in speakers for our Earth Bistros, assisted other Sacred Earth members with their efforts, and also with the help of others arranged Alastair McIntosh's visit to our church earlier year. This is *my* little teaspoon of effort. But they say that enough people with teaspoons can move mountains.

Daniel Berrigan and more recently Alastair McIntosh both said that activism must have a spiritual base if it is to be sustained. From my personal experience, I agree. Moreover I is my belief that activism must come from love to be sustained. Guilt does not provide much more than a brief spark which will likely flame out. As we live into our passions, I pray that we will all act out of love and be sustained by the spirit.

Carol Nelson

For me, finding voice can be difficult at times. I am the third offspring from a quiet, soft-spoken family and was taught to wait before speaking. At my day job it's easy for me to feel like I'm not being heard or taken seriously. I have had to learn to be both fierce and to listen carefully. It has taken time to find my voice and sustain it. So what gives me the desire to speak, to take action? What keeps me both grounded with a bit of fire to keep my hope alive? The love, the warm fire that I feel in nature and through communities such as this one keeps me open to those possibilities. I am sustained by the awe and wonder I feel in the natural world. Like many of you, I am nearly constantly inspired and curious about the beauty of this earth from the tiniest beetles to the mountains. I found a profound healing presence in nature and want to preserve its beauty.

For example, during a dark time for me, I went for hike with a friend. The birds were singing. The salmonberry flowers were out. And there was an *abundance* of green everywhere. I felt a big "Oh!" inside. If these ferns, birds, and salmonberry bushes were saying . . . It was as if they were saying, "We do not know that your country is at war, that work is difficult, that you are sad and frustrated about many things. Given a chance, we are going to keep on growing and we are beautiful."

There is a way of being outside that helps my sense of being a part of something bigger, a way of washing my clutter and anger away. Being in *this* community has given me the chance to find call and to have courage to look into broken places, to try out my voice, and to share what's beautiful. It has given me the space to think and feel what my call and place for caring in this world could be

What have I felt called to do? I choose to be with Sacred Earth Matters group, to be inspired, to encourage others, to take action that demonstrates our care for creation. It's an opportunity to be inspired by others who want to do what's right, each in their own way. I hope the classes we've offered help all of us to live in ecologically sound ways.

And nearly 10 years ago I felt called to participate in the renovation of the building, the New Cornerstones Project you might remember. And I spent many, many, many hours reviewing plans, helping us to pick greener options, and to keep the air safe and clean while our programs continued.

How has all of that changed me? It's affected the daily choices I make: What I buy. How I travel. Where I work. What I eat. And where I'll donate money. Some choices are not without cost or discomfort, and I don't always choose well. They are also not without pleasure. There is joy of engaging with somebody on the bus or van pool, getting in better shape by walking or biking, meeting local farmers and other land stewards. Thinking about these choices becomes, for me, a way of being more intentional about life – a practice. They are my little teaspoon.

I'm not too sure what's going happen to this world as the climate changes and toxins accumulate in our environment. I do believe healing will occur as we meet these challenges together and discover new ways of being.

Paul Schaeffer

I first found out about global warming in 1990s. My earliest image of it is from the Kevin Costner movie "Water World." I knew little about the science of global warming and this movie was science fiction, so the threat of global warming seemed remote and possibly even unlikely. And when, back then, people spoke about global warming, they said it posed a threat to our grandchildren, which made it seem far off. So, I started thinking there was plenty of time, which was wrong. And also I thought something else that was even more wrong; I thought "they" will take care of it.

Since then, I have had to learn a big lesson: There is no “they.” To fix a big, widely dispersed and entrenched problem like climate change, it takes not a “they” but a “we”: We and our voices, we and our actions. Now, don’t get me wrong. There does exist a “they” who sees things differently. This “they” represents industries whose profits rely on the release of CO₂. They have loud, amplified corporate voices and they can easily drown out anyone who would take action that might cut into those profits. Their persistent voice is powerful, but so is ours.

Sometimes we speak out with our voices, with letters to the editor, tweets, blogs, Facebook posts, and meetings upstairs in this church. And sometimes we speak out with actions. The others are loud, but we are doing what we can, in a slow and steady way, in a small chorus of persistent voices to keep from being drowned out.

Here at UCUCS we shifted from palm fronds to local ferns. We held classes and informative presentations. We added solar to the roof. We relamped to use LEDs. And we are upgrading to double-paned windows. These things weren’t done by one person and they weren’t done all at once. They took years and they took all of us. In this case our actions are heard across the city and across the region. But these are small things, and we have a lot more to do. So if we speak up together and if we act together, our actions can ring out loudly.

Sometimes, though, I still feel in danger of being drowned out. That’s when I turn to my faith in the sacredness, the godliness of Creation, a faith that gives me the courage and hope to find *my* voice and to encourage others to add their voices to that small but growing chorus and, if you don’t mind the mixed metaphor, one teaspoonful at a time.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/08/18/2016