

It started out as a spark... just a little car spark, and it now ranks as one of the worst disasters in Redding's history, all within a matter of a couple days. I have learned more about the unbelievable dynamics of a wildfire, the power of something so small to become so out of control in such a short time period, and the amazing resiliency of the human spirit to hope beyond hope for the best. Many of you were up close and personal with the flames over the past few days. Many of us have the visual sights and roller coaster of emotions emblazoned forever into our hearts. The ferocity upon which the flames descended upon Whiskeytown Lake, the terror of seeing flames cresting our mountains, the sounds of exploding and snapping trees, and the endless ash falling from the sky over everything – these memories will linger way past the last flame to be doused. Yesterday I came upon a large piece of ash that had fallen at my feet. It was a good two inches long and three inches wide. I couldn't help but pick it up and examine it, ponder where it had come from, questioned if such a large piece indeed came from a beloved home of one of our neighbors. Although there are redeeming aspects to fire, surely its purification properties, its warmth in the middle of winter, its flickering upon a single candle, or its crackling whispers at a campfire, none of these come to mind when we recall the last few days.

So when I was pondering this large piece of ash out front, I struggled with what word of hope would God share with us this day. Already there are fanatics, one neighbor who shall remain unnamed, who chalk it up to God cleaning out the world, purifying creation of the ills of society. That doesn't even make sense on a logical level, let alone a scriptural level. All the references fanatics cite towards being delivered from the burning fiery furnace such as in

Daniel's story or in Psalms about our enemies setting the sanctuary on fire, bringing it down to the ground and burning all the meeting places are not stories of a vengeful God bent on destruction, they are stories of a God who doesn't desert humanity, who hears the cries of each and every one of us who asks how long we will be victims of disaster? Daniel is a story of hope for a people that are being persecuted, and I'm not too sure how many of us can genuinely say that is our standing here in Redding. Psalm 74 is a lament, an honest sharing of the heart when we encounter evil or a negative turn of events beyond our control – Kubler-Ross called this stage of grief “bargaining.” This particular psalm is far more about our feelings than it is God's response. No, these stories did not catch my eye but then I ran across this passage from Exodus, the story about Moses and the burning bush, and a couple words grabbed my heart like never before. I grew up with this story as some of you might, heard it in Sunday School, sang about it in Vacation Bible School, acted it out in youth group. But this week, the words from the Revised Standard Version “yet it was not consumed” from verse 2 struck a chord.

Let me remind you about this story for a moment. We need to remember that Moses was born a Hebrew, but raised an Egyptian at a time when the Hebrews were enslaved by the Egyptians. Moses always identified with the Hebrews and their oppressions and in his zeal killed an overseer and fled. He fled far away and found refuge with a man named Jethro, the wise and good priest of Midian. He married Jethro's daughter and got a job looking after Jethro's herds. It was not a bad situation for a refugee of a felony to get a job and marry the boss's daughter. Life was good. Very good as a matter of fact. One day, he was tending Jethro's flock in the desert country around Mt. Horeb, a peaceful mountain not unlike the smaller ones that surround us. There he was minding his own business, when he sees a bush out in the middle of nowhere,

burning for all it is worth. He considers the possibilities: a bolt of wayward lightning, spontaneous combustion, perhaps one of the sheep's hooves struck a flint. Or maybe it only looks like it is burning; it could be some kind of chemical reaction, or a fake rigged up with foil and red lights, some Midianite's idea of a joke. His senses told him otherwise. There was the column of heat rising into the air, there was the smell like a campfire, and the sound of crackling wood. Yet it wasn't – crackling the wood that is. Not a single twig is turning to ash. Glowing like a coal beneath the flames, the bush is not diminished, and finally Moses has to take a second look. "I will turn aside," he says, "and see why the bush is not burnt." Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says this event was as much a miracle as it was an inquiry into Moses' state of mind. God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention to something for more than just a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke. Maybe there is something to be said about paying attention to what is going on around you long enough to behold the miracle without letting it slip through your grasp.

When God sees that Moses has turned aside to look, that he has let the sheep wander a moment to pay attention to the miracle right under his nose, then and only then does God speak to him out of the bush, calling him by name and telling him to take off his shoes. Which Moses is reluctant to do, incidentally, standing so near to that popping ball of fire. But he does, and as he listens, God lets Moses know the identity of the One to whom Moses is listening. This God is not one of the local lesser gods, this is the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, the God of Moses' ancestors. God identifies God's self by the relationship God has with people, and the history God has with them. God has heard them crying, like the woman who sat outside the Sheraton Hotel this week in tears having just learned her home was no more. God has seen

how badly the Hebrews have been treated, like the immigrants who flee certain death in their own countries to find life in the land of the free and the brave, just like so many of our foreparents did. And God wants someone to do something. In Moses' case, God wants him to arrange for the Hebrews' escape from the Egyptians.

Now this doesn't sound like a great plan for Moses. In the first place, he is a wanted man. If he goes back to Egypt, he might as well walk straight into police station and give himself up. In the second place, he has some major misgivings about his leadership abilities. However, God doesn't provide a lot of reassurances to Moses, like "I promise nothing bad will happen to you" or "I promise your house will be spared." Wouldn't it be so much more convenient if God gave those kinds of promises? But this is a God who operates within relationships not within things. Remember the name God uses: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Sarah, the God of Randy and Gail, the God of Don and Deborah, the God of Bruce, the God of Stan and Pauline, Marci, Susan and Chris..." – each and every one of you who has felt the bitterest of disappointment, pain, fear and anxiety in this week. To you, God says, "I am with you. "To all of us, God says, "I am with you."

But, if we are honest with ourselves, we can't help but ask, "What kind of promise is that?" It is a burning bush kind of promise. It is a kind of promise that is never consumed, never defeated, never destroyed. It is the kind of promise, that if we let it, will burn brightly in those sitting next to us and in our friends and loved ones. It will shine forth from complete strangers like a young adult from down the road named Katy who showed up to say "I saw your post on Facebook about what you are doing – how can I help?" It is the kind of promise seen in the Red Cross, our denomination's Week of Compassion, it is in the aid and grants that will help

us rebuild and start anew. It is a reminder that what is of God can never be consumed by fire.

Yes, the bush burned, but God's presence will never be consumed. Yes, there are beloved houses and nature that have been burned, but that which makes a home, that which resurrects scorched ground has not been consumed. All because we have a God of relationships first and foremost. Not a God of vengeance, not a God of judgment, but a God of love in whose presence we are never defeated. Thanks be to God.