



*Burning Brush*

May 2, 2021: Liturgy of the Word for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

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*Oh Lord: may your Word only be spoken, and may your Word only be heard; in the name of Jesus Christ, the living Word. Amen.*

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

Each Monday afternoon, I log on to a live Facebook event with dozens of preachers from across the country and around the world. We go over the Gospel for the following Sunday. We read the text three times. The first time, we share the word, phrase, or image that catches our attention, that quickens our pulse, that invites us deeper into reflection. The second time we ask questions of the text: no cross talk, no answers, just questions. The third time we read it, we ask ourselves how the text makes us feel. Again, no commentary; we just lay it out there. A good number of us in the parish have used this version of this method, called *lectio divina*, or “divine reading,” to read Scripture and other texts. It is an ancient way to invite the Holy Spirit to inform our imaginations and to change our lives.

This past week, as we went through the Gospel text, the phrase that kept recurring for me was, “thrown into the fire and burned.” The question that kept occurring to me was, “How is this Good News?” And the feeling I kept feeling was: dread.

Typically, I am not keen on preaching about fire in connection with the spiritual life. But I couldn't ignore it. It could have had something to do with the news I saw this week that wildfires in the western part of our country are becoming more numerous and devastating. Arizona alone, for example, has already had 311 fires this year, compared with 127 through the first four months of 2020; 15,555 acres have burned, compared with 1,290 acres in the same period last year. One of the causes of this phenomenon, according to the *New York Times*, is poor forest management, allowing a buildup of grasses, shrubs, fallen branches and small trees that can serve as fuel for wildfires, though climate change is also playing a role. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/30/us/wildfires-fire.html>

So, I have just a few musings along these lines about fire.

My first musing is this: What are those things in our lives that are like the buildup of grasses, shrubs, fallen branches and small trees that can serve as fuel for wildfires? Hoarded resentments, little lies that grow into big ones, unresolved conflicts and insecurities, an unwillingness to forgive or to admit mistakes? This is like the brush that is cluttering the floors of our lives. Jesus talks about those branches that wither from disconnection to his life-giving sap and fall to the ground, good only to be fuel for the wildfire.

This wildfire might take the form of an argument that rages out of control in a family. Or maybe this wildfire erupts in violence against whole groups of people, either over and hot, or cool and calculated, maybe even unconscious, that keep whole classes and races in their place. Piles of withered branches, starved by their disconnection from Jesus, end up fueling wildfires.

My second musing is that I imagine an association between pruning, which we hear about in the Gospel today, and controlled burns, both of which lead to new life. Any gardener can tell you that cutting off dead or underperforming parts of a plant allows the remaining plant to grow stronger and more vibrant. And from what I've read, in forestry, controlled burns of underbrush are an important part of preventing out-of-control infernos.

I wonder, are we capable of controlled burns—setting alight those thoughts, habits, actions, attitudes, that loosen our connection to Jesus, that cause us to wither? What are those things that we must actively cut out of our lives, our personal, community, and national lives? What are those things that we must carefully, but intentionally, burn? A ritual I've taken part in with groups, to symbolize not only the forgiveness of sins, but the firm intention to burn away old habits and go forth into new ones, is to write one's sins on a special piece of paper, then set a match to them, and they go, "poof!" They just disappear, hardly even any ash.

A final musing is on Mt. St. Helen's in Washington State. You may recall that 41 years ago this month, Mt. St. Helen's exploded with a force that devastated hundreds of square miles, 280 square miles to be exact. The force and heat of the explosion melted glaciers, flattened forests, destroyed roads and buildings, killed 57 people and untold thousands of creatures, and left a smothered, charred, and seemingly lifeless landscape, like the moon. <https://www.livescience.com/27553-mount-st-helens-eruption.html>

And yet, from the ashes of that cataclysm, new life emerges. I was there in the mid-1990s and saw some of this miracle earlier in its history. Even in the areas that appear to be the most barren—the so-called Pumice Plain—new life is returning. A plant called the prairie lupine, which can take nitrogen directly from the air, has taken root. These small wildflowers attract insects and plant eating creatures. They catch blowing leaves and other organic matter. The accumulation of dead plants and insects, the windblown organic matter, and the droppings of plant eating animals slowly create pockets of soil on the volcanic deposits. From there even more life comes forth. <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/world-of-change/StHelens>

I think of the various kinds of devastation that each of us has encountered in our lives, and I think of the way that life slowly, and sometimes, rapidly, reestablishes itself.

And to me this points to the Good News, that I was wondering about when I first felt like I had to preach on fire: that the DNA of the universe contains the creative and healing power of Jesus. That even amidst flame and destruction, personal and corporate, even in the face of hard and difficult things that happen to us completely apart from the will of God—God does not will us any ill—Jesus is present and making all things new. Jesus never explained injustice or suffering, he never tried explain it away with a pithy phrase or clever saying; but he never avoided it, either. He always is present in it with us. <https://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/keepingthefaith/2013/01/minimum-protection-maximum-support.html#>



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As we seek to stay close to him, to abide in him, Jesus strengthens us, encourages us, and bears fruit within us. Though as Christians we have never been promised that life will be easier, we *have* been promised that *nothing* can separate from the God's love for us, in Christ Jesus.

**Amen.**