

Playing with Fire

Menno Mennonite Church
February 15, 2026

Purpose: To connect the congregation to the work of the Spirit that is both near to hand and well beyond our imagination.

Message: As with the people of Israel we are invited into the nearness of God's Spirit, all the time recalling God's work.

Scriptures: Exodus 24:9-18 (I Will read); Matthew 17:1-9 (Please read)

Synopsis: Among the more striking features of Christian thought is the intimacy of our notion of God. As warranted as it is, we also know that there is uniqueness too. God's presence and God's face was a awful sight (as in full of awe) and something that marked a direct challenge to the person encountering God's presence. Being touched and moved by the holy demands a reverence and, yes, fear. The Spirit invites us to move and be moved by the way of God with us, and recalls always to tie into what God is doing. Yet in the midst of this we are promised that God's Spirit will move us to new life and new hope.

Exodus 24:9-18

⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu,
and seventy elders of Israel went up,
¹⁰ and they saw Israel's God.

Under God's feet
there was what looked like a floor of lapis-lazuli tiles,
dazzlingly pure like the sky.

¹¹ God didn't harm the Israelite leaders,
though they looked at God,
and they ate and drank

¹² The Lord said to Moses,

"Come up to me on the mountain and wait there.

I'll give you the stone tablets
with the instructions and the commandments
that I've written in order to teach them."

¹³ So Moses and his assistant Joshua got up,
and Moses went up God's mountain.

¹⁴ Moses had said to the elders,
"Wait for us here until we come back to you.
Aaron and Hur will be here with you.
Whoever has a legal dispute may go to them."

¹⁵ Then Moses went up the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.

¹⁶ The Lord's glorious presence settled on Mount Sinai,
and the cloud covered it for six days.

On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from the cloud.

¹⁷ To the Israelites,
the Lord's glorious presence looked like a blazing fire on top of the mountain.

¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up the mountain.

Moses stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Don't go playing with fire. It is right there in the top level of thou shall nots of childhood, the essential things that we need to learn as kids and teach as parents. Yet there is a certain irony in the fact that some of the most resilient memories I hold as a young person, I was doing precisely that: playing with fire. Growing up in a place far less prone to grass fires than the West, it was a fairly common thing to get up to on a summer afternoon. I have memories of launching model rockets, both designed to be recovered and those that we designed to be, shall we say, expendable. I am still amazed that we were allowed to keep the small cast iron cannon I traded a classmate for that we could shoot into the corn fields behind the church with black powder given us by our father (quite a departure from his usual demeanor, let me tell you). Then there were the small projects and contests of fire building where we set out to see who could boil their billy can of water first. Fire is dangerous. And beautiful. And useful. And destructive. And creative in ways that it would take all morning to list. We start where we must- with thou shall not—but there is a whole lot more involved than that.

Among the things that we take for granted within the Christian context is the way that we talk about God with such a fully direct and unmediated sense. We have a personal relationship with God. At lunch we are likely to stop in and say thank you for what has found its way onto our plates. As good and right as that is, I think we can miss how rather unique that is too. So much so that we can rather take it for granted that this is how the creator of the universe is thought about. We might even somewhat disregard the reverence other faiths hold the name of God with fear and trembling as superstitious and perhaps a bit pagan. Even our co-YHWHist believers within Judaism hold a reverence for the divine that resonates far more with the fear and trembling of the Old Testament than anything else. We can perhaps wonder at the mystery of the disciples on the mountain and try to make sense of their fear and trembling. At the end of the day of course we know that this is one of those two things can be true at the same time sort of things. The God of the universe cares for and comforts us, sometimes in highly individual and personal ways. But so too is the universe an awful sight when it comes down to it, enough to bring pause to anyone with half a mind to consider it. Among the most remarkable things about the Exodus encounter of this morning was the simple fact that there was anyone left to relate the tale.

Is there little wonder than that there is such a strong relationship between the nature of God and the image of fire? The reason we do not play with fire is that it is uncontrollable, dangerous, and can rapidly consume and take on a shape that we never intended. In many ways

that sounds a whole lot like the holy. The Biblical writers offer this image in recounting God time and again. It appears in the covenant with Abraham; in the burning bush and the calling of Moses; in the pillar of flame and cloud that accompanies the people on their way in the wilderness. Of course we then know the story of Pentecost and the appearance of the Holy Spirit as wind and flame. The image of fire binds law and Spirit together in many ways.

The commonality of these mountain top experiences of both the transfiguration and the encounter on Sinai is that they were thin moments where the divide between heaven and earth become even more sheer and bringing the hold close. With Jesus on the mountain a bit of his humanity got set aside for a moment to give a glimpse of the divine within. In Exodus, the leaders of the people are brought close to God and a bit of humanity was encountered there as they were able to commune and eat in God's presence. Perhaps it was a preview of incarnation however briefly. In both cases the Holy One comes and speaks the truth to those who would witness it, speaking in wind and fire even as they also encountered the awe of one in whom we could only remember feet on an inconceivable surface to the ancient mind. These were encounters where the human world touched the divine and was changed by that touch in ways that are hard to fully understand and unpack, especially from this distance.

But what transfiguration and tablet giving brings to us has a lot more to say about God than it does about us. These are reminders at very different points in the story that the work of encountering the divine is never a one way street. God comes and encounters the world too, and even comes and relates in ways that surprise and even challenge the way things are. This was very much an easy equation: to see God was to die without a whole lot of question. Yes; it was Moses that when on full retreat on Sinai. Yes there was a whole lot yet to come when it comes to God and people. But this was the way it was to be: God was going to be with and among God's people not just in tablets of stone, but in presence and proximity. Note that the detailed blueprints for the house of God, the tabernacle, proceed right after this encounter. This is not to be discarded as a momentary flash in the pan, but the way God wanted to be with his people from here on out. It is a warm picture to be sure, but certainly one with challenges.

But that is the way with the Spirit and the way that it resides with us. Yes it is our comforter, our guide, our friend, our sure presence. It is all of this and so much more. But we can never lose the reality of the fire that this Spirit holds for each one of us as well. We don't often go there. Good Anabaptists as we are we are far more given to a notion of the Spirit that is

out there to be sure, but we are not always good at naming its presence or describing its work in our midst. We are more given to noting our service and our discipleship as a result of Jesus following then by the inspiration of the Spirit's flame fanned within us. We have not done a good job of describing the working within, let alone developing ways to better understand its power.

But that is where I think the metaphor of holy fire comes to our aid. It holds the both the warm nearness that is needed and real, and the wild nature of God at work. The late Rachel Held Evans wrote well of this image of the flame of the holy when she wrote: Rachel Held Evans wrote of the dancing witness of the Holy Spirit through the image of fire across Scripture when she wrote,

“The Spirit is like fire, deceptively polite in its dance atop the wax and wick of our church candles, but wild and mercurial as a storm when unleashed. Fire holds no single shape, no single form. It can roar through a forest or fulminate in a cannon. It can glow in hot coals or flit about in embers. But it cannot be held. The living know it indirectly—through heat, through light, through tendrils of smoke snaking through the sky, through the scent of burning wood, through the itch of ash in the eye. Fire consumes. It creates in its destroying and destroys in its creating. The furnace that smelts the ore drives off slag, and the flame that refines the metal purifies the gold. The fire that torches a centuries-old tree can crack open her cones and spill out their seeds. When God led his people through the wilderness, the Spirit blazed in a fire that rested over the tabernacle each night. And when God made the church, the Spirit blazed in little fires that rested over his people's heads. “Quench not the Spirit,” the apostle wrote. It is as necessary and as dangerous as fire, so stay alert; pay attention.”

God comes to us and meets us in ways that are often beyond our experience and outside our control. We can be taken to places and circumstances that are hard to predict and harder still to now as strategy. That's how we would do holy encounter were it left to us: 5 easy steps to a better world and a more faithful following, maybe throwing in a nice timeline for good measure where the divine would commit to deliverable outcomes and meaningful results. Instead we are given a flame that will move where and how it will, breaking apart and putting back together in almost equal speed and measure. There is that which is coming apart and that which is being planted for new life and new hope. Say what you will about the state of the church, perhaps this

is the best metaphor we have for where we are: the fire is burning, many things remain to be discerned and known yet of where it all might lead. Not all is of the Spirit. But we are invited to wonder where such a Spirit can take us.

Transfiguration is more than just one more mountaintop proof of who and what Jesus is. It does that-sure. But it also continues what has been all along: the desire of God to come and meet us along the way with the Spirit's fire; warming us, enticing us, amazing us, intriguing us, and bringing about the next new thing. It reminds us that the Spirit, wild and unpredictable as it is, creates and invites us into what God is doing. I am no prognosticator. I cannot and will not pretend to know what our life and times might bring about in our world. But I do know that the Spirit remains on the move, fanning the flame, and building what is next for us, for the church, for the world. It can seem that all is rush and noise and wind. But we can look for the fire, be it spark, flame or inferno, and know that God is within it all, coming to know us where we are.

May we know this flame and be enticed by its fire as God is doing a new thing. Amen.