

*Playing with Fire*

Exodus 3:8-15, Matthew 16: 21-28

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Maybe you have warned your children, or, looking back at your childhood remember being warned yourself. “Don’t play with fire...you might get burned.” We are all conscious of the dreadful power of fire these days. It has become commonplace for us to witness every summer record setting forest fires. Blazes in California this summer have forced many from their homes and claimed millions of acres of forest. I was talking this week to a friend who lives in Utah who said the sky was darkened by smoke rising into the atmosphere two states away. I think almost everyone can share some learning experience with fire. Some may have experienced the terror of losing a home or a business to fire. But even if you have never been touched by such a tragedy, maybe you can remember learning the hard way to respect fire. I can certainly remember small burns and close calls that taught me not to play with fire.

Last week we met Moses, drawn from a basket among the reeds of the Nile River. As a child he was baptized with water. Now that he’s come of age he’ll be baptized with fire. So we arrive together at the scene of the burning bush, where Moses comes into the presence of God once again. He takes off his shoes to stand upon holy ground. The voice of God speaks to him as he gazes into the flame, which will endure as a symbol of the great paradox of his life and ours. The bush is on fire but it is not consumed by the fire.

Jackson built a shed last spring in our backyard. As an architect he knows so much about materials available to use in construction, the limits of those materials and the amazing possibilities they contain. I watched with interest as the framing of this shed was raised. Every once in a while I got motivated to drive a few nails myself, but mostly I helped by making lunch. One of the interesting things about the shed that he designed is that we never had to paint it because Jackson finished it with a Japanese technique called Shou Sugi Ban. That may sound like a very delicate and exotic method of construction, like eating sushi rather than steak. But, make no mistake, this is the perfect DIY home project for any genuine redneck. If you love monster trucks, four wheelers, guns, fireworks, and moonshine, there’s no reason you shouldn’t have a Shou Sugi Ban shed in your backyard. You’re going to need a tank of propane, a box of matches, and a respectable blow torch from Home Depot. Before you put the finished wood on the side of your shed, you lay it on the ground, hook up the tank, and blast away. You burn the dickens out of it until its evenly blackened with a thin char. The finish should look slightly peeled and scaly. When it cools down you’re ready to tack it onto the shed, and you maybe finish it with a coat of linseed oil. This is the material expression of a biblical truth: not all fire is consuming. The touch of the flame actually weathers and protects the wood. The fire strengthens the wood and extends its life.

When Moses comes into the presence of God he finds himself at the needlepoint of this irony. The power of God to give life is mysterious and terrifying. God speaks to him in this scene not with a gentle whisper but with a dragon’s breath. “I am the God of your father and mother,” the Creator says in a frightful introduction, “the God of Sarah and Abraham.” The scene is so fearsome that Moses takes off his shoes in reverence and keeps his head bowed so as not to look into the face of God. Soon we see that the purpose of this scene is not to belittle Moses but to empower him. At the burning bush, God commissions Moses to confront Pharaoh and liberate his people. He resists

the commission. “Who am I that I should go,” Moses protests. The king of Egypt will surely not listen to me. The voice of the Lord responds that Moses will go, not in his own name but in the name of God. “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Drawn up from the water and now baptized with fire, as John will later herald Jesus into Galilee, Moses takes the message of God to Pharaoh.

There is much we could say about the water and the fire in the story of Moses. Last week I talked about how the water blesses him throughout his life from the Nile to Red Sea to the Jordan River. This week we could just as well reflect on how Moses burns with the presence of God, how the touch of the flame protects him so that he will not be consumed. Although Moses takes on extraordinary power, these scenes reveal to him and to us his humanity. He is not the source of the water nor the source of the fire. He is a human at the mercy of these elements. Though he might channel their power, the stories show how he’s also walking along the ledge of destruction. So the scene of the burning bush is remembered for the reverence that Moses shows. Moses receives this power as a trustee might hold a precious gift. He is not the source of this power. It does not ultimately belong to him. And yet he is in stewardship of it.

There is a judge I know who almost always talks about his court in terms of the families that come before his bench. I almost never hear him talk about his work without some reference to the impact that the decisions of his court has on those households. He’s even prone to reminding his clerks and various office staff that the work they do can have significant consequences. I suppose that might be taken for granted in a judge’s chambers. But when I hear someone who holds power in their hands speak in this way, I think of Moses standing before the burning bush, with reverence for the fire. “Remove the sandals from your feet, for you are standing on holy ground.”

There is another powerful figure in our country today. I follow him quite closely because unlike this judge I know he seems completely out of touch with the impact his decisions have on real people. Recently he’s taken to using religious symbols to activate his base. He stood, for example, outside a church in Washington, DC, holding a Bible upside down. On another recent occasion he said that his political opponents wanted to remove God from our civic life. “In God We Trust,” as you know, is printed on our money. The words, “One nation under God” are in our pledge of allegiance. So last week, on Twitter, he exclaimed, “Happy Sunday! We want GOD!”

As a pastor my prayer is that he gets what he asks for. But if I were his spiritual advisor, I would caution him to be careful. “If you play with fire...”

Amen.