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## *Fire!*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler  
The Third Sunday in Lent – Year C**

Two days ago, Friday, I was finally able to help my brother out. My brother is the one who manages our old family farm property down in Coweta County. And part of the pasture and tree management, means fire.

It takes fire.

It takes fire to keep clean and clear the beautiful land here in Georgia. Fire is not always disaster. Controlled burns are the reason each one of us can enjoy pretty pastures and clear woods.

Anyway, I was able to join him – my brother—two days ago; and we began the next burn, on our land that runs right next to a creek, “Line Creek,” they call it. Across the line is another county entirely. And in that county is a nice city, Peachtree City, with lovely subdivisions and pleasant houses.

Essentially, we started a fire, a big fire, right across the creek from where they live. We start those fires most every year, or every two years, and we know we will hear anxious and frantic voices. Of course, we’ve done the necessary work, the filing with the fire department, the acquiring of a burn permit.

But most people don’t know that. All that happens with them, is that they look out of their carefully cultivated and cautious window, across a creek to the view that they think is theirs; and they see a fire.

Oh no! A fire! They call the Fire Department. Fire departments, apparently, have to respond to every report they get. The good fireman responded last Friday, looked across the valley and creek to where there was a fire, and he started walking towards us. We saw him coming.

My good brother-in-law, part of the family, saw him coming, and he hollered across the creek: “It’s okay! It is a controlled burn. We have a permit. It is okay!” The good fireman understood immediately, and he simply waved and turned around.

Fire!

About three thousand years ago, Moses saw a fire. He did not call the Fire Department. He was actually out in the wilderness, too, whether of his own accord, or God’s, it is hard to tell. But he saw a fire. He saw a bush on fire. And he stopped. He paused. And he did not panic.

That pause is maybe one of the most important moments in all religious history. Moses did not panic. Moses did not call the Fire Department. Moses did not go crying to some imagined authority. Moses simply stopped, and watched.

And it is only because he stopped, only because he paused, that he noticed something glorious and powerful and world-changing. The bush was burning. The bush was burning, but it was not consumed. It was burning, but it was not burning up!

Welcome to God!

Welcome to a fire that burns, but does not burn up! Most of us, when we see a fire, we note it as fire. But, how would any of us know—at first glance—whether the bush was being consumed or not? We have to pause,

sometimes for a long time, if we are to observe that the fire is not consuming anything. It had to have taken Moses some time to figure this out. He had to take off his shoes. It takes a while, it takes patience, it requires taking off your shoes and getting down to earth, to figure out that the bush was not being consumed. Yes, it takes time to see a miracle! Wonder takes patience Moses was fascinated.

This is a principle for any of us who dare to contemplate God. We rarely experience God immediately in anything. Instead, a healthy experience of God takes time. We have to stop, to sit for a while, to notice what is burning and what is not.

Then, dawns the powerful realization itself! The bush was not being consumed! This is the most dramatic proof of God that humanity knows. The power, the fire, the grace, the love of God proves itself, by never running out!

Rudolf Otto, the great German theologian of a hundred years ago, is famous for providing a particular definition of God. He spoke it in Latin. He said that God is *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*. God is that mystery which is tremendous and fascinating. We want to be close to that mystery, so close that there is nothing between us and it. We take off our shoes so that we can be close to its reality.

Well, the tremendous and fascinating mystery of fire shows us the tremendous and fascinating mystery of God. Over time, we see many variations of fire in the world, and many colors of fire. From red to blue, fire emits all sorts of colors, just like God does. And, then, even when we know all the details and chemical processes and reactions of fire, even when we know about oxidation and spark, there is still something unknown in the event of fire which fascinates us. We are drawn to the varying and flickering and roaring flame of God.

Then, the more we learn about God, the more we want to learn. Our present knowledge of God never completely describes God. Our knowledge of God never consumes God.

There's another word for this. We call it love. It is the same way with love. Moses was learning something of divine love that day in the fire. Divine love, a love which we call *agape*, a love which we are called to give to each other, is like this fire. It can never give out. One of the proofs of this *agape* love is that the more we love another person, the more love we find to offer.

Those of us who been in love (oh! and I hope everyone here has been in love!) –those of us who have been in love – know that love, too, is a tremendous and fascinating mystery. Our loved one fascinates and attracts us. And the more love we give away, the more love we have. Love replenishes itself the more we use it. That is its miracle. Why do we give everything we have for the ones we love? Because we know that love grows when we give it away.

Divine love is not what folks these days call a zero-sum game. Try it. Try loving someone so much that you give out of love. It's impossible. The truth about *agape* love is that the more love you give, the more love you have to give. Love burns, but it is never consumed. How sweetly does the ardor of love burn, and yet it is never consumed. Moses learns through fire to love his people, over and over again.

Then, after the fire in this world-changing passage from Exodus, we have the words. Yes, Moses' experience of the living God was beyond words; it was mystifying and powerful. But his experience did also use words. Moses, like any human being, did need words, in order to understand and to guide. Moses heard his own name spoken from within that fiery mystery. He heard that this God was indeed the God of his own family, the God who cared about the powerless and those who were miserable. "I know their sufferings," said this God to Moses.

And God told Moses that God would send him –Moses—to deliver that people out of the hand of slavery. Moses asks, "Who should I say has sent me?"

"I Am Who I Am," is what the divine voice said. That is what the Hebrew word, Yahweh, generally translates to. The four letters that we know as "Y-H-W-H," which we pronounce Yahweh, mean "I Am Who I Am."

"Tell them 'I Am' sent you!"

Yes, those are the words that God uses, but they hardly clear anything up. Those words can be just as mystifying as fire. *I Am Who I Am?* The translation of those words has been unclear ever since they were spoken. It could be *I Am What I Am*. It could be *I Am Becoming What I Am Becoming*.

That's the translation I like the best. *I Am Becoming Who I Am Becoming*. That translation has action and movement in it. The God of the Bible is not simply a "being," objectified and unmovable. Somebody once said it

this way: “God is not a noun; God is a verb.” Like fire. Is fire a noun or a verb? If God shows up in fire, God is a God of movement and event.

And, finally (finally at the end of this long sermon – long because the Exodus text is long!), the movement of God is not finally destructive. Yes, the movement of God does destroy things; it purges what is wrong. It wipes out what is not needed. Last Friday, the fire that my family set out in the old woods and pastures of Coweta County looked scary, like it was destroying things. But it was only destroying the flammable old leaves and dry underbrush that could create a far worse fire disaster later on. And the fire was actually creating more fertile material! The ashes from fire become the holy and fertile ground for fresh growth.

I will remember such fire in a few weeks from now, when we will light a really big fire, here on Easter morning, at the scary time of 6:00 in the morning. That Easter fire, too, is a tremendous and fascinating mystery!

Fire opens the opportunity for fresh growth and life; and the fire of God is always burns towards life and health, towards deliverance and salvation. It is God who leads oppressed people out of slavery and into a promised land of milk and honey. It is God who makes people move, too, even leading us at night with a pillar of fire, towards freedom.

It is this God of fire, who says “I am becoming who I am becoming. I will burn, but I will not consume. I will burn and I will not give out. I will love, and that love will never give out.”

AMEN.

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