

TEXT: Ps. 29; *Exodus 3.1-6; 13.17-21; 19.16-18; Acts 2.1-4 **DATE:** January 27th, 2002

SERMON TITLE: Lesson From a Stump-fire.
CHILDREN'S SERMON:

Exodus 3:1-6

1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."⁶ He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 13:17-22

17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt."¹⁸ So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle.¹⁹ And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, "God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here."²⁰ They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.²¹ The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.¹

Exodus 19:16-18

16 On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.¹⁷ Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain.¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.²

*1*The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

*2*The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

Introduction:

The world of the Bible is distant from us.

Distant not only in time and space but especially in culture and in language.

The Bible, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures (or as we sometimes call it The Old Testament) reflects a completely different culture, a completely different language ... and consequently a completely different way of thinking or describing truth.

The Bible is written by God inspired Middle Eastern people.

Westerners like you and I, learn and express our selves in the Western way ... the Greek way.

Truth is presented in detailed words and careful descriptions.

We love bullet lists and points.

An Easterner of the land and time of the Bible ... those who wrote the bible ... are much more likely to describe truth in pictures and metaphors ... and in the meaning of places and structures.

For example, a Westerner like you or I might describe God as *powerful or loving or all knowing*.

These are our theological terms ... our definitions that describe God.

An Easterner like Jesus or the writers of the Bible are much more likely to describe God by saying, *Shepherd*, or *Rock* or *Living Water*.

The Bible is full of these pictures which are meant to know something of God.

And one of the most interesting of these pictures or metaphors for God is *Fire*.

II. The Texts

We did not read Genesis 15.17 this morning, the passage where God makes His covenant with Abraham, but I want to start by referring to it.

When God made His covenant with Abraham, the Bible writer tells us He made His presence known by way of fire (Genesis 15.17ff).

After sunset God revealed Himself in a **smoking fire pot** and a **flaming torch**, two elements that were connected with sacrificial ritual in the ancient world.

These images are part of the “burning” motif that describes God’s zeal and judgment in the world.

Fire represents the consuming, cleansing zeal of Yahweh as well as His unapproachable holiness, which are all interrelated (cf. Isa. 6:3-7).

In the darkness Abram saw nothing else except these fiery elements that passed between the pieces of the slaughtered animals cut for the covenant God was making with Abraham in which he promises to make him the father of a nation ... which implied that Land will have to be taken away from the people who now occupy it.

Thus by way of fire we are told that God is completely separate because of the fire of His perfect holiness, and that God is a consuming and cleansing fire, zealous to judge the nations and the world to fulfill His covenantal promises to Israel.³

When God called Moses to lead His people out of bondage in Egypt, the Bible writer tells us He made His presence known to Moses in flames.

The call of Moses to be Israel’s deliverer took place when he turned to see the marvel of the bush which burned and yet was not consumed (Ex. 3:3).

Like all such manifestations which the Bible records, for example the smoking fire pot and flaming torch at Abraham’s

³Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

covenant (Gen. 15.17), the burning bush is a self-revelation of God.

The story commences by saying that ‘the angel of the Lord’ appeared to Moses ‘in a flame’.

The Hebrew translated ‘in a flame’ more aptly signifies ‘as’ or ‘in the mode of’ a flame.

All of the things about fire in the Abraham passage apply ... fire describes God’s zeal and judgment in the world ... fire represents the consuming, cleansing zeal of Yahweh as well as His unapproachable holiness, which are all interrelated

In addition to this, the revelation of God to Moses conveyed in the mode of a flame in a bush may be summarized in the three words ‘**living**’, ‘**holy**’ and ‘**indwelling**’.

First, the bush is not consumed because the flame is self-sufficient, self-perpetuating ... a flame with its own life ... not dependant on anything but **alive** totally in itself.

Second, and by a consistent symbolism, the flame is the unapproachable holiness of God (v. 5), being, indeed, the first overt expression of the divine holiness in Scripture as Moses is told to take off his sandals for he is standing on holy ground.

Thus Moses hid his face from the flame and was afraid to look upon the holiness of God.

Third, so as to reveal the sovereign grace of God who, though self-sufficient, freely chooses and empowers instruments of service, the flame in the bush declares that the living, holy God is the Indweller ... He indwells the bush but does not consume it.

Thus the revelation at the bush is the background of the promise of the divine presence to Moses; “*I will be with you;*” or I will indwell you and use you (*Ex. 3.12*).⁴

All of this and more, in the picture of God as fire in a bush.

⁴The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

When God delivered His people out of Egypt the Bible writer tells us He made His presence known at night by a pillar of fire, at night (Exodus 13.21).

Again all of the other thoughts are represented ... God's zeal ... God's judgment in the world ... God's consuming, cleansing zeal ... as well as His unapproachable holiness, ... all of these interrelated.

But there is more.

Pillars were used as methods of marking the way.

In the ancient world they were erected at cross roads to show the way one should go.

God appearing as a pillar of fire at night was to guide His people.

We still have all of the imagery of the holiness and consuming and zealous and judging nature of God ... but here it is combined with the desire of God to lead His people directly.

The people of God will be lead by the Holy consuming zealous fire of God.

When God made His covenant with His people from Mount Sinai the Bible writer tells us He made His presence known in smoke and fire (Exodus 19.18ff).

All of the aspects of fire describing God's nature that I have mentioned up to now apply ... but again there is more.

The God of heaven descended to Mount Sinai in a display of fire which can only be described as a display of His power and majesty.

God demonstrated His total awesomeness; little wonder that the people trembled, standing at the foot of the mountain (v. 16; cf. 20:18).

The people heard crashing thunder and a very loud trumpet blast. They saw flashing lightning ... fire, and dense billowing smoke as from a smelting furnace.

And they felt the mountain trembling in a violent earthquake.

Only Moses and Aaron were permitted on the mountain; the priests and the people were to stand before it.

If they in curiosity saw the LORD they would perish because of their unholiness.

This fire event at mount Sinai and the subsequent instructions given, vividly reminded the people of the immeasurable chasm between the awesome power of the holy divine and the sinful human, as well as the miracle of divine revelation given this gulf.⁵

And when God came to live in the lives of those who believed in His Son, who had destroyed the chasm between the divine and the human by dealing with sin on the cross, the Bible writer tells us He made His presence known by way of a mighty wind and tongues of fire (Acts 2.3ff).

The references to “wind” and “fire” are significant.

The word for “Spirit” (*pneuma*) is related to the word translated “wind” here.

It also means breath.

Both nouns—“spirit” and “wind” or “breath”—are from the verb “to blow, to breathe.”

The sound like the blowing of a violent wind ... from heaven points to the power of the Holy Spirit and the fullness of His coming.

The tongues of fire portray the presence of God.

The God who fills is the same mighty awesome holy consuming judging leading indwelling refining God of the Old Testament who displayed Himself over and over again in the form of flames (Gen. 15:17; Ex. 3:2-6; 13:21-22; 19:18; 40:38; cf. Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16).

But now all of that ... all of it ... gets deposited into the inner beings of the cleansed believer and follower of Jesus.

⁵Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

No believer there was exempt from this experience, for the flames separated and came to rest on each of them.⁶

A God of fire who breaths his fire into each believer in Christ.

The possibilities are endless with the fire of God deposited within you.

Just think about it.

III. Conclusion

In thinking about this as it applies to my life ... and in keeping with the Near Eastern and biblical way of speaking in pictures using fire ... and to encourage you to take these picture into your own thinking ... I want to conclude with this story, a parable really.

It snowed nearly a foot one night a while back.

I was up at first light looking at the firs and spruces, all drooped and heavy-laden.

The picturesque sight took my mind back to when I was about twelve living in the Rocky Mountain Trench.

We used to get good solid winters back then, not the wimpy wanna-be winters that have become the norm these past few globally warmed years.

As kids living in a remote lumber camp where fun was a figment of our own minds, cold winters with lots of snow fairly stoked the furnace of our imaginations.

A pair of old handmade cross country skis, a white cloak fashioned from a borrowed bed sheet, a carved piece of wood for a rifle and we became Norwegian ski troopers fearlessly fighting Nazis;

A nearby cliff that was masquerading as a ski hill, an afternoon's work with shovels and we were Olympic ski jumpers pressing for gold;

⁶Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

A homemade wooden sled and the family dog lashed to the front of it and we were Sergeant Preston of the Yukon trailing yet another arctic murderer.

The possibilities of a winter adventure hunting us down and taking us captive were endless.

On one particular mid-winter morning my best friend and I had been captured by a pair of snowshoes and the legend of the Mad Trapper of Rat River.

We had dressed in anything that resembled fur that could make us look like Mounties in the Yukon, dawned packs of heavy whatever we could find, included a couple of peanut butter sandwiches, a billy-can and tea, the rations of Yukon Mounties everywhere, and set out on snowshoes for a hike into the mountains behind the lumber camp, in search for Mad Trappers.

We tramped along on our bear-paw snowshoes for the better part of 4 hours and eventually found what we were looking for.

It was a huge ponderosa pine stump, at least 3 feet across and absolutely full of pitch.

We dug the deep snow out from around the stump with our snowshoes and then whacked off some of the bark and sapwood with our hunting knives to expose the pitch soaked heartwood.

Next came the match.

I was fairly proud of my ability with match and wood back then but what happened when match and stump made contact was more satisfying than even I could have anticipated.

Instantly the stump flared up into a cheery warm flame, which then proceeded to a bonafide bonfire and within minutes elevated itself all the way to a full blown white man's fire.

The plan was to melt snow, boil tea and toast our frozen peanut butter sandwiches whilst reciting verses from the works of Robert Service.

The trouble was, we could not get close enough to the fire to get the billycan on it to get the tea going.

And there was not a stick to be found anywhere that was long enough to allow us to toast our sandwiches without roasting one or two body parts.

Like white men everywhere, we stood way back and watched our campfire imitate an out of control oil well fire, sucked on our peanut butter popsicles and ate snow.

It had turned out to be a rather disappointing camp, although the fire could be considered a success.

Eventually, when the stump-fire had melted the snow to bare ground for about ten feet all around and it was threatening to bring a spring thaw to the whole valley, we decided to put it out.

This was no small undertaking as we now had to pack snow to it in our hands from a fair distance, but eventually the fire and the whole area was buried under a foot of tramped down snow and no smoke or steam was visible anywhere.

Satisfied, we left for home, chattering like squirrels about what winter adventure was likely to track us down tomorrow.

That winter it snowed another couple of feet after our winter stump-fire adventure.

We never thought much more about it all that winter.

We never even thought about it next spring when there was an early forest fire a few miles behind the lumber camp, which entertained us with a wonderful display of water bombers.

It wasn't until the next fall when another adventure was pursuing us that we happened by where we had been hunting mad trappers the winter before.

The sight was incredible.

It was virtually painted red by the water bomber's fire retardant.

The forest fire had been very hot and had burned everything to the dirt for about three acres.

In the center was our winter stump-fire, or better put, a huge deep hole where our stump-fire had been.

Obviously the winter stump-fire had not been completely out when we left it buried under a foot of tramped down snow.

Even after receiving another couple feet of winter snow, It had burned all winter, mostly underground.

Even the huge roots had burned underground; leaving large trenches radiating out from the deep stump hole.

And then, in the spring when everything had dried out, the fire had burned to the surface and consumed everything for three acres.

We stared in fear and disbelief at what our innocent winter stump-fire had accomplished.

Even in the snow, and for along time under it, It had been a powerful and hot fire, and an expensive one.

The water bombers must have dropped five or six loads of fire retardant on it.

Who knows how many men were involved in putting it out?

We knew that if anyone deliberately started a forest fire they could be arrested, tried, convicted and made to pay for the whole expense.

Terrified, we silently left, vowing to never tell anyone about the power of our winter stump-fire and, I at least have never told a soul, right up until now.

I tell the story now, hoping that the passage of forty years of time has saved me (although with our present government's obsessive compulsive attitudes towards fiscal matters it wouldn't surprise me in the least to be sent a huge bill tomorrow as a result of the telling of this story today).

However, I will risk telling this story in order to say something about God through the picture of fire.

We have already seen how that in the Bible, God often makes His presence known by using fire.

When God made His covenant with Abraham He made His presence known by way of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch (Genesis 15.17ff).

When God called Moses to lead His people out of bondage in Egypt, He made His presence known to Moses in the flames of a bush that was burning but not consumed (Exodus 3.2ff).

When God delivered His people out of Egypt He made His presence known at night by a pillar of fire, enabling escape at night as well as by day (Exodus 13.21).

When God made His covenant with His people from Mount Sinai He made His presence known in smoke and fire that was as hot as a kiln and that caused the whole mountain to quake (Exodus 19.18ff).

And when God came to live in the lives of those who believed in His Son, He made His presence known by way of tongues of fire (Acts 2.3ff).

In the Bible, fire symbolically speaks of many things when it comes to God, but for me, especially after reflecting on my childhood experience with a winter stump-fire, it speaks about the power and tenacity of God.

That old stump-fire, burning unseen under the snow and the dirt for months only to flare up with powerful force when the time was just right, reminds me of how God tenaciously and powerfully works in my life with his holiness.

Very often He is at work underground, in the background, unseen and not even felt by me or those who share my life.

At times like these I often assume that the flame of His Spirit has been smothered because of something I have done or perhaps not done.

And then, when the time is just right, the fire of God's Spirit burns to the surface of my life with power and He makes me aware of His transforming, consuming, refining and purifying work

that has been going on in my life all the time, underground and behind the scenes.

And I reflect, 'How foolish of me to think that I could ever put out the fire of God.'

And I think how important it is for me to be willing to take the fire of God.

When the late King George was visiting a pottery plant some years ago, two special vases were shown to him.

Both were made of the same material and both had been painted in the same style and manner.

One was a beautiful ornament, and the other blurred and unsightly.

And the reason? One had taken the fire and the other had not! 7

⁷Tan, Paul Lee, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, (Garland, Texas: Bible Communications, Inc.) 1996.