

Malachi 3:1-4  
Acts 2:1-4

Fires

Aug 6, 2023

### **Malachi 3:1-4**

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

### **Acts of the Apostles 2:1-4**

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

### **Tentative Order of Worship**

Prelude (Joanne Ewert)

Welcome & Announcements (Eric Neufeld)

Gathering hymn: "Holy, Holy, Holy!" #76 VT

Call to worship

Hymn of Praise: "Holy Spirit, Come with Power" #57 VT

Lighting of the Peace Lamp

Time with the Children (Eric)

Hymn: "Wind Who Makes All Winds" #372 VT

Joys, Concerns and Congregational Prayer

Scriptures: Malachi 3:1-4

Acts 2:1-4

Sermon: Fires

Hymn: "Move in Our Midst" #827 VT

Benediction

Sending Hymn: "For the Beauty of the Earth" #120 VT

## **Slide: Fire and Smoke**

### **Fire**

I heard this past week that in Canada this has been our most destructive fire season to date, and it is only early August.<sup>1</sup> Rarely do we hear a news report these days without reference to the forest burning. God created fire to be a part of the natural world. Humans harnessed it. We are ever mindful of it as fire puts flame to our forests. “Our relationship with fire is complicated. Through the ages, we’ve used it to stay warm, cook dinner, even decorate our birthday cakes. But we’ve also been devastated by its destructive path”.<sup>2</sup> This past summer, like too many summers, tens of thousands world wide have been displaced by forest fires and millions inundated with sustained 10+ air quality warnings on account of smoke. Like in our lived experience, fire within the biblical text burns both ways. I will get to some biblical reflection on fire, but I want to share the spark which brought me to this topic within our summer series on Christian ecology amidst climate change.

Once or twice a week the CBC Saskatoon morning addition hosts a conversation on health with Raj Bhardwaj. Dr. Raj is a family physician and urgent care doctor working in downtown Calgary, faculty at the University of Calgary and otherwise well respected. Late in May (May 23, I think) of this year I heard Dr. Bhardwaj speak on the topic of “climate anxiety”; particularly on the effects of the forest fires in the western provinces. We hear time and time again about the danger to our lungs from those charred particles floating in the smoke. It turns out, though, that other health concerns arise as fire disasters persist.

## **Slide: Climate Anxiety**

Memory is adversely affected with too much char. Mental health and psychological well being also take a hit when the forest burns around us or we get socked in with forest fire smoke. While not limited to forest fires, there is growing research into the manner in which natural disasters impact our spiritual, physical, and psychological health.<sup>3</sup> These all contribute to what researchers are now calling climate anxiety. Surely any faith tradition worth keeping around needs to speak into this space of anxiety, and the human factors contributing to it, and the God seeking to usher us through it. And so a sermon on fire was ignited.

## **Part I: The Biblical Background**

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<sup>1</sup> [As unprecedented fire year rages on, experts warn of longer, more destructive seasons | CBC News](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Into the Fire | Nature of Things \(cbc.ca\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> See this article on the effects of climate related disasters upon the young: [Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey - The Lancet Planetary Health](#)

### **Slide: Pentecost Tongues of Fire**

As I mentioned earlier, fire in the bible burns in a variety of directions. There are 659 references within the Bible (apocrypha included) which mention fire or cognates like fiery or enflamed. There are passages using fire in conjunction with theophanies: God appears in a burning bush; God leads the Hebrews by a pillar of fire by night; God is known in fire on Mt. Carmel in a contest with the god Baal. There are passages which describe fire as a part of daily living: warmth at night or in kitchen use. There are passages in which fire has a purifying or inspiring effect: today's scriptures from Malachi, for example, or the baptism of "the Holy Spirit and fire" which John the Baptist preached. And there are passages in which fire has destructive or punitive connotations: think here of ornery Israelites consumed by divine fire, Sodom and Gomorrah, or unfruitful branches / vines / weeds consigned to the fire.<sup>4</sup> This is a general distillation of material out of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*—the gold standard for those doing biblical reflection emerging from linguistics. From here I will offer material out of articles I have come across during the summer in preparation for this Sunday.

### **Fire is a Gift: the benefits of controlled burns**

#### **Slide: Controlled Burn Image**

Fire is a natural process—like rain. Many of the native plants and animals that call earth home have evolved to thrive with periodic episodes of natural fire. One of the most reliable ways to boost forest health is by reintroducing fire. In 2020, The Nature Conservancy celebrated 30 years of conducting controlled burns as an ecological management tool in the state of Maryland.<sup>5</sup> They are not alone or even an innovator of controlled burns.

Indigenous people have been practicing controlled, deliberate burns in North America, and around the world, for millennia. For the Yurok, Karuk and Hoopa Tribes of Northern California, human-managed fires across their traditional lands are vital. They promote the growth of traditional food sources like acorns, basket-weaving materials like hazel, and the life cycles of salmon.

"People have become disconnected with the land and fire," says Margo Robbins, who now serves as executive director of the Cultural Fire Management Council, a community-based organization that seeks to facilitate cultural burns on the Yurok Reservation and surrounding ancestral lands. "And they've forgotten, or perhaps because there has been a generational assault on who we are, perhaps they never knew who we [are]. But it doesn't have to be that way", she says. "Fire has

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<sup>4</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (volume VI), edited by Gerhard Kittle and Gerhard Friedrich; and translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), pp 934-947.

<sup>5</sup> [Working with Fire in Maryland | The Nature Conservancy](#)

the ability to reestablish that connection”.<sup>6</sup> Managed burns have been a cultural gift which they are coming to embrace again, as the Federal Government allows them to manage the fires once more. These controlled burns mitigate the effects of lightning strikes, which are also a part of the created order

**Slide: Missinipe Image of charred wood and fire weed emerging**

I have previously preached on the gifts of the fire to the Churchill region of central Saskatchewan in the aftermath of an intense forest fire in that area. We had a pastor’s gathering that fall in Missinipe hosted by Ric Driediger. He was somewhat traumatized by the inferno which nearly consumed his home, town, cottage and livelihood. How would you not be? The guides walking us through the burned forest could acknowledge, though, the gifts of the fire. Peat bogs of the region make the river system acidic over time. Forest fires with their charcoal run off bring the acidity levels down. Hence, the fish thrive. When the fish thrive, the people eat. When the fish thrive, the eagles re-appear. When the fish thrive, the fisher-folk and their dollars return. Young trees sprout from the ashes which bring the moose and deer in greater numbers; this means greater harvest for the local hunters. Without the canopy of the forest, berries grow which feed people and smaller animals—and the smaller animals attract larger animals which have the potential to keep people warm and fed in winter. Fire is a gift.

**Part II: Reflections on the theology and discipleship of Fire**

**Slide: fire fighter on a shrub brush plain**

I do not have the statistic of the number of fires started by careless humans in this 2023 season, but I remember the percentage to be a shocking number when I heard it. Human related sources are linked to smoking, poor maintenance of camp fires and off-road entertainment like the quad. This, in part, reflects the human condition of “being aflame” by our desires (1<sup>st</sup> Cor 7:9). Too often our desires take precedence over ecological concerns. At what point can we say we are satisfied? At what point can we say enough is enough? For example...

Must our GDP grow for us to be successful? If we are solely profit driven, yes. But what if we said, “You know what: we live pretty well in this country, distribution issues aside, but we have enough. We do not need more.” This is a track slightly different than models focused on maximum personal pleasure or profits. A change in attitude might temper the fires that burn within and around us. Paul’s reference to “being enflamed” in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7 was around sexual matters. While still a part of our 21<sup>st</sup> century conversation, sexual cravings are

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<sup>6</sup> [Indigenous Tribes Restore Prescribed Burns in California \(nature.org\)](https://www.nature.org/indigenous-tribes-restore-prescribed-burns-in-california)

simply a microcosm of a larger issue we call consumerism. And the manner in which we over consume slowly and surly erodes our ecosystems: forest, family, and future. What consumes our thoughts, time and treasure? Think about that. What consumes our thoughts, time, and treasure? Are there places for controlled burns within our lives? Are there ways to diminish the incendiary clutter within us? There might be something to learn, or so our sacred texts would suggest.

In this past week I have heard that the “planet is on fire” from the radio, newspaper and in conversation. If we are serious about suppressing the fire, it is a systemic question. All our households combined contribute a fraction towards the greenhouse gas emissions which warm our world. There is place for policy which assists businesses and governments towards environmental sustainability. These comments are not about political parties. They are directed on behalf of our planet. We may not agree on specific policies, but hopefully we are coming to understand that the conversation is vital. It is for the beauty of the earth that we need to talk. It is about our role as Christians stewards of that beautiful creation that we need to talk. From my perspective we need more conversations than sermons. But preachers are paid to preach, so here I am. Oh bother, pooh bear would say.

### **Slide: Light Coming Through Old Growth**

Mortality. We humans are not invincible. Neither we or our institutions live forever. It is not only a good thing, it is a nature thing. In her book *The Great Emergence* Phyllis Tickle described the rummage sale that has happened in Christianity approximately every 500 years. Every 500 years or so there has been a forest fire in the Christian world: the fall of Rome, the Great Schism, the Protestant Reformation, the post-modern world in which we live. In the clearings created by the fires, amazing new life has emerged. The metaphorical fires in our world need not be feared. It is a natural part of life. God raises up new vegetation and animal life in our midst. Fire is a gift. It is a discipline to view our losses as potential avenues of renewal. Do we have eyes to see and ears to hear?

In this regard, Fires (real forest fires and the metaphorical fires of our lives) are sometimes a place in which the presence of God is made known. Perhaps the quintessential bible passage to reflect such an experience comes from Isaiah 43:2: “when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” God’s people are not given an exemption from the fire. No, we are promised Divine presence which somehow goes with us through the fire. Consider the angel of God who joins the three men consigned to the fiery furnace in Daniel 3. It can be like that—in the fires of life we sometimes find God shielding us or a Divine messenger alongside us.

### **Slide: Climate Change Illustration**

At a social level, there is power in collective conversation, encouragement and action. We know from a large body of literature that social support is one of the strongest predictors of mental well-being. Quoting from an article on climate anxiety: “Individuals who engaged in collective action—particularly if they saw those actions as having an impact—could have a stronger sense of self-efficacy and hope for the future. On the other hand, there’s some research that people who engage in activism can be at risk for burnout. Theoretically if someone was engaging with all these actions and not seeing changes at a larger level, that might contribute to a sense of hopelessness...collective action could prevent climate anxiety from turning into feelings of hopelessness and despair”.<sup>7</sup> (For additional information on Climate Anxiety follow the link from the footnote).<sup>8</sup>

### **Slide: Hand Holding Acorns and Beargrass**

I want to close with a reiteration of hopeful words from our biblical and theological tradition. In this exodus from the old world to the new world, we must not forget that a pillar of fire goes before us in the night—and that is none other than God. We will make mistakes in the wilderness and we will undoubtedly bring fiery serpents upon ourselves, but the story tells us that God goes with us through the desert. God goes with us through the fire. God goes with us through the sufferings and through death and into new life. This is our story. Live responsibly and practice trust. This is true of the fires in our ecology and personal lives.

As a part of this, we place our hope in the tongues of fire which will inspire us and others of God’s peoples. The tongues of fire will lead us forward as we listen individually and collectively. And on this point of the collective....

Finally, the research says that we benefit from talking together and supporting each other in the smaller or larger acts of ecological stewardship. There might be ways in which this could become a part of study groups, our potluck tables, or small group conversation. Liturgy, song, and sharing are a way to strengthen our feeble efforts. It would entail leadership to facilitate it, and it would entail buy in from the congregation. Maybe this is part of what it means to be church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Maybe.

God grant us trust, hope, and courage. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

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<sup>7</sup> [Yale Experts Explain Climate Anxiety | Yale Sustainability](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Climate anxiety: Psychological responses to climate change - ScienceDirect](#)