

## Divine Heat

October 18, 2015 | Patrick Preheim

“Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and by him the rocks are broken in pieces” (Nahum 1.6). In this congregation we don’t often speak of God’s wrath, do we? And yet here in Nahum 1:6 we have it, and this is not the only portion of scripture which raises the specter of a God frustrated to the point of anger. Even Jesus gets mad: mad at diseases (Mk 1.41), mad at scribes and Pharisees (Mt chapter 23), mad at money changers in the temple (Jn 2.13ff). Wisely, or unwisely, I have chosen this morning to grapple publically with the concept of a God who cares so much for us, and the nations, that she gets upset. One of the metaphors Nahum gives us is that of fire, so I will work with this image in exploring Divine heat.

To give you an idea of where I will be going let me summarize my thoughts on the wrath of God. First, we all do dumb things that have negative consequences. We say hurtful words. We neglect a friend. We willfully commit a misdemeanor. Often these words and actions unleash a firestorm. God’s wrath sometimes is nothing more than the weight of our own sin. Our response, the biblical testimony would suggest, is repentance and commitment to reform. And when sinned against, we are asked to learn forgiveness. We must come to terms with our own failures and the failures of those around us. Secondly, the powers of the world, like us, must take ownership for their behavior. Systems, multi-nationals, nations are also accountable to God. God is not mocked by systemic violence. In Nahum it is the nation state of Assyria being held to account. Our biblical witness tells us that God will act—maybe sooner, maybe in little while—but God will act. This wrath, though, is more refinement than destruction. It is God’s hope that all peoples will be led to walk in his light (Is 60.3), and elimination of any one nation or tribe is counter-productive to this Divine mission. It is one reason, I believe, Jonah (also written about Assyrians) is in our canon. It is one reason, I believe, Jesus does not call down fire upon Samaritans in the same way that Elijah did (compare Lk 9.54 & 2nd Kngs 1.10). Jesus clarifies that the wrath of God restores, not destroys. Allusion to these biblical episodes is my transition to a brief treatment of fire in the bible. From there we will look at the way fire operates in the natural world. These two sources of wisdom, the Bible and the natural world, confirm for me that God’s fire is about refinement.

Fire in the Bible: I confess to loving the bible, so that is where I start. We do not have time for a full exploration of the ways in which Divine fire appears in the biblical narrative, and yet a brief overview does prove illuminating if not warming. In some stories fire is quite positive. God addresses Moses out of a burning bush (Ex 3.3). At night God leads the children Israel by a pillar of fire (Ex 13.21). Burnt offerings, sacrifices, often produce a pleasant aroma to God (see Lev). In the contest with the prophets of Baal on top Mt. Carmel the Lord was made known in fire (1st Kings 18.38). Horses of fire power a chariot of fire which takes Elijah away to God (2nd Kings 2.11). In the fiery furnace Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are kept safe (Dan ch 3). Malachi speaks of a “refiner’s fire” which purifies the corrupt priesthood (Mal 3.2-3). On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples appearing as “tongues of fire” (Acts 2.3).

Other biblical stories use fire in a more edgy way; often consuming the idolatrous. Sodom is soaked with fire (Gen 19.24). The Hebrews entering the Promised Land used fire to destroy the booty taken from opposing tribes (Josh 7.12; see articles on the **הַרְרָם**). As I mentioned earlier a Samaritan army, at Elijah’s behest, gets engulfed by flames (2nd Kngs 1.10). In John’s

Revelation an angel tosses both the Beast and a false prophet into a lake of fire (Rev 19.20). There ends my brief survey. From the Bible we go to another source of wisdom—nature.

**Fire in the Forest:** Last month Mennonite Church Saskatchewan hosted a pastors' retreat in Missinipe, which is quite near several of the forest fires of this past summer. An outfitter guide took us on a walking tour of a previously wooded area which burned this past summer. Forest fires, according to the guide, are actually good for the forest and the eco-system of which they are apart. As we view pictures of the burn sites I will share with you some of the teaching we received that day. The photographs were taken by Lois Siemens, pastor of Superb Mennonite Church, and are used by permission.

### **Slides One, Two, Three [burned stumps and trunks]**

In the first photograph we see a burned area in the foreground juxtaposed with an area relatively untouched in the background. One of the first things our guide noted was that forest fires are good for the land. The burning of decayed grass, underbrush and larger trees unleashes the minerals and nutrients locked in that vegetation. In the long run scorched areas of the forest will be healthier than areas preserved from fire. Without periodic fires in the forest the soil suffers.

Sometimes the death of the large trees, important people, in our lives causes us distress. And yet this is nature's way. Often the church only grows in healthiness with the stately pines courageously die in the line of fire, or through a wind storm or through natural attrition. The gift of these people continues on long after they are gone. In their living and dying they nurture the soil of our lives. We grieve, and also give thanks, for the gift of these giants among us

### **Slide Four [Burn area, grass, water]**

It often goes that what is good for the soil is also good for the water. I was unaware of the fact that Otter Lake and the whole Churchill river system struggles with acidic water. Apparently the peat bogs and moss produce chemicals that raise the water's acidity. Over time and without correction this would be problematic for the eco-system. The charcoal created by forest fires is alkaline. The influx of alkaline into the bogs and ponds which feed Otter Lake moderates the Ph level of the entire river system. Without runoff from burn sites the fish and birds would suffer.

### **Slides Five, Six, Seven [Fungus on Trees]**

The next three slides all capture fungi growing on charred chunks of wood. We may shy from a potato or steak cooked too crisp, but not these mushrooms. There are still precious nutrients in those burned trees and these spores are perfectly designed to get their little roots right in through the cracks in the bark caused by a fire's heat. These spores will increase the rate of decomposition in the burned sections of the forest. As a food source they will entice rabbits and squirrels into the area. The presence of rabbits and squirrels will, in turn, draw larger game which will feed and clothe the Grandmother's Bay First Nation settlement just down the road from where this fire happened.

### **Slides Eight and Nine [New Shrub Growth]**

In the same way that rabbits and squirrels attract carnivores, the new growth of shrubs attracts larger herbivores like moose and deer. The density and intensity of old growth conifers which we find in the boreal forest is simply too much for most deciduous growth. The increased light and soil fertility caused by a forest fire sparks the growth of much low growing vegetation. Berry leaves, young birch, aspen and their ilk is what the moose and deer like to eat. Without a good

food source they move on. In the wake of a fire, though, new growth of the deciduous takes off. In addition to fox, lynx and wolf soon the residents of Grandmother's Bay will be collecting berries like no-bodies business, tracking moose, and hunting deer.

Revitalization of congregations and institutions sometimes only comes when fire has cleared a space for new plants and a return of long forgotten creatures. In her book *The Great Emergence* Phyllis Tickle described the rummage sale that has happened in Christianity approximately every 500 years. At the 500 year interval there has been a forest fire in the Christian world: the fall of Rome, the Great Schism, the Protestant Reformation, the 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. In the aftermath of fire we do well to consider the new vegetation and animal life that God is raising up in our midst.

Slides Ten, Eleven, Twelve and Thirteen [Tree Survival]

God is gracious in that different tree species have been gifted with survival mechanisms which rarely leave a forest unable to recover from fire, even the most serious of fires. The Jack Pine has cones which only open in extreme heat. They need a fire to propagate! In one of these pictures we observe a Jack Pine seedling emerging. The Black Spruce has a different tact of survival. They put all their seeds on the top of their trunk and hope a fire will not go that high. The burned or decayed tree falls spreading the cones on the ground. The Birch has a collar at the base of their trunk which protects the roots if the fire does not go underground. Shoots quickly emerge from the collar if the birch roots survive the fire. The Aspen's strategy is community. The roots of one Aspen tree are linked with others in the grove. If one tree survives the fire the Aspen grove will regenerate.

We do not all have the same coping mechanisms when the fires of life hit, do we? Some talk it out, and others sort it out in solitude. There is no one way to survive a fire. We each have our temperaments and our gifts. We use what we are given. This is no guarantee that we or our seed will survive. In all this we look to, and trust, the Great Creator. We find meaning and strength in sublimating our sense of what is best to that of our Lord who tends the entire forest. We learn to trust. We may survive, and maybe not, but we believe the forest will continue.

**Slides 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 [Fireweed]**

I close this slide section with images of the fireweed. It is one of the first plants to repopulate an area after a burn. The seeds weigh practically nothing and are carried by the wind-- a bit like a dandelion. They sprout quickly in the rich soil of a burn. Their purple hue is an amazing contrast to the blackened remains of a forest. They speak of hope. They are a divine harbinger of what will come. And sometimes this kind of angel is enough to sustain us day to day.

In summary, Point #1: Unfortunately, sometimes we humans are careless when camping, and we are the source of the fire that burns our very own forest. This summer certain fires in northern Saskatchewan were started by human error. It happens. We do not put water on the glowing embers. We say hurtful things. We turn away when support is needed. We screw up. We burn the forest. And still, I believe, God can bring something good from the holocausts we start in motion. Let us abide in God's grace and learn.

Point #2: Sometimes we humans suffer from the fires other people start. Nebuchadnezzar fuels a blaze for three young men. Hitler creates gas chambers and ovens to do his work. Bashad, Putin, Isis do their torching. This is the type of fire to which Nahum was responding.

International war crimes, which the Assyrians had committed, are an affront to God. The forest burns on account of willful pyromania, and this is not acceptable. God hates these fires and desires that angels accompany us through them, as was the case for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Lest we become too righteous, however, we are culpable in many of these international messes. Canada, our beloved Canada, stands in judgement for its unwillingness to sign an international arms agreement. Canada, our beloved Canada, is living with the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools. ISIS will stand in judgment for their violence even as we cope with the fires we have created on Turtle Island. Christians may not survive the horrendous fires of genocide or international conflict, but we can make the soil rich for future generations. Christian alkaline can help balance the PH of the world's fresh water. Christian charcoal can provide fertile soil for seeds of renewal, seeds like the fireweed, to take root.

Point #3: Sometimes random lightning strikes hit. This happened all last summer in Northern Saskatchewan. And it is like that for us. Economic conditions can be such that a lightning bolt starts a fire: a fire in our business, a fire in domestic finances, a fire in the extended family. Personal or family health can be a lightning bolt which ignites a fire storm. These things happen. Why? We do not know. We believe, however, that God is there to bring something good out of these tragic circumstances. We believe this because it is what our biblical stories tell us. We believe this because it is what the natural order tells us.

May God grant us all hearts humble enough to repent of our errors, hearts gracious enough to forgive wrongs done to us, hearts courageous enough to trust that God's kingdom will one day fully come on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church