



KINDLE

THE SPIRIT

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A few years ago, it was a Sunday, I was coming home from church when I saw and heard that sound and that sight you see far off and don't worry much about, fire engines. And as I got closer to my neighborhood, to my street, the sound got louder. And when I pulled into my drive, I saw I could not pass because fire engines were blocking the way into my cul-de-sac. So I got out and I started to walk, but when I got out, I opened the car door and the moment I did, I could feel it. I could feel the heat in the air, the crackle, the dryness in my eyes, and no one ever forgets the smell of a house fire.

I saw the column of smoke rising and I started to walk a little faster because from where I was, it looked like it could be rising right up from my house. It was right in line. And as I came around the bend, I saw it was not my house on fire, it was my neighbor's house on fire. It was a Sunday morning and I knew he was going to be at church and I also knew he sang in the choir so he probably wouldn't be answering his phone if he even had it on. And so I called some of our friends in common to maybe go there and let him know that this is happening.

And one of them went and got him and I remember him arriving on the scene and looking around, looking around, looking around, not so much at the house. He saw his husband and went right to him. That's who he was looking for. And he started falling into his husband's chest. Now, many of us neighbors knew each other because we had gone through COVID together and in Hawaii they didn't let you go many places except roughly where you lived. So we would do laps around this quarter-mile cul-de-sac over and over. We'd walk past and overshare our thoughts and ideas. That might only have been me. My sermons during that time were very strange.

Anyway, I had very patient neighbors and we loved each other very much. And so we gathered and witnessed the pain as neighbors and we started planning, we started asking questions. How did it happen? What can we do? Who else should we call? Then we called more of the couple's friends and they started to come. And then the house we just saw was on fire, but we knew what to do. And the soundtrack of all of it over and over through tears drenching his husband's chest was my friend saying, "At least everyone is okay. At least everyone is okay. At least everyone is okay."

Fire is a destructive force. No doubt. It causes untold damage to property and to lives and to parts of the environment, and yet it is also helpful, important to the environment. It's necessary, it's useful, and it has the distinction of being at the center of more of our lives than I think many of us realize. It's hard actually to overstate the importance of fire or its prominence, its warmth is what kept our ancestors alive so we could be born. I know we're going back, but that's real. And around its glow were where the first stories were told to make sense of this harsh and beautiful world that we know. Some of the roots of how we communicate, how we commune as human animals were born around a fire in songs sung into its glow and in tales and truths spun for our ancestors and something about it stuck.

Now, I'm no sociologist, I'm not a credentialed religious historian, but many who are point to the campfire as one of the centers of communal life for ancestral people of all kinds. It's perhaps the most singularly uniting experience around the world through time if you count it by years, by millennia. So maybe it's not by chance that we don't have to look very far in religious texts or in any genre of art or writing or expression to encounter fire images. It's one of the four Aristotelian elements. It's one of the manifestations of God in the Hebrew scriptures, it represented the word of God going over the apostles as the Holy Spirit in the Christian scriptures. Zoroastrianism is thought to be the originator of the eternal flame where we see that even today in its temples. Fire in faiths around the world is everywhere.

Here in Texas though, where else do we hear about fire showing up in religion? Beth had to say it at the last church service. Hell, that's, thank you, you said it right. Hell. You're the best, John. Yes, that's right, in hell. Now juxtaposed with the awesome and powerful acts amid the living are beliefs in some of the world's religions that hell got fire in it. Now the Greek word in the Christian scripture commonly translated as hell is Gehenna. Gehenna means only the valley of the wailing in Greek. Has no connotation of fire at all. And it is a transliteration from the original Hebrew of Gehenna, which is the name of an actual valley outside of Jerusalem, which is the combination of the words valley, ge, and henom, henna, in Hebrew also no connotation of fire. Can probably see where I'm going.

From this point though the life of the word Gehenna, there are some deep divisions in it. Ancient authors wrestled with it. Why this fire? How did this happen? And fights are still raging today. In preparation for this sermon, I saw a video with thousands of comments just a month ago posted about the meaning of this word and whether there is fire there. The word that was later translated as hell when Jesus would have spoken it, would have very little if anything to do with fire.

That all came later, but it had a great deal to do even then with atonement, with what it means to be in the valley of wailing, what it means to understand that kind of pain. Some believe that people would go

to that valley by this name to atone there in prayer for their wrongs, for their sins, if you will, against their faith, against their God, against their fellows, against their neighbors. And we know these wrongs when they occur, when I do them, when others do them, there is almost a sense of burning inside. There is a feeling of anxiety. This setting things right can heal, that atonement is an answer for.

Sometimes I think the truths we live as humans manifest themselves more in religion than religion discloses the truths about humans. You know what I mean? They can still feel like heat at times though. Now in this faith we reject the idea of original sin. If that is shocking to anyone here I apologize, I should have warned you. And for those of you who don't know what it is, original sin in general is the idea that God so loved the world that he damned it to hell. She, they. I used the he pronoun there because usually that's the kind of people talking about it. Our faith in its ancestors believe though that we are inherently... oh, bless you, not evil. That doesn't mean we haven't seen some stuff in our day and it definitely doesn't mean we haven't done some stuff in our day, right? Can I get an amen?

More than a few of us have survived, survived some hard things in life or have done some hard things to survive and I bless that here because to be here today to hear these words and hold these papers is a sign we are living. Our poet names that surviving as the resistance in us and the very genetic makeup and processes of our body is an act of resistance, is the telling of the stories we've got to tell. She says it and I'll say it again, bodies are the sight of stories, the tales given to us and retold, retold, never altered and the ones forgotten changed unremembered until this place, the body she means is made of only ourselves. Our own small dictators, peacemakers, architects, artists, a derelict cottage, a monumental church right here struck in gold in artist's studio. I love that one. Layered with paints and cut paper, knives and large canvas. The site, the only place containing our best holy song. I will live, I will live. I will keep living until everyone is okay.

I told my friends who'd lost their home that they could stay in my guest room. My guest room had a lovely view of their former house, so they did not take me up on the offer. I did push my spare key into Kalani's hand and make him take it and go so that if they were ever working at the house, they could have a place to rest or something. I think he's still got it. Anyway, it was a month after the fire actually that I was getting ready to move from Hawaii to be here with you fine people. And I offered my friend virtually anything he wanted from my place and they were very happy to have a virtually new smart TV but not really interested in any of the other things. And it wasn't because they weren't nice, my things were nice. It's just that in the month before that our friends, their communities had given them so much already that they had filled a house with it. They had almost everything they needed in their home.

So when my friend came over for the TV, he looked at my nice things and asked what I was going to do with them and I said, I hadn't really thought much, like OfferUp or something. Turns out he works, I didn't even know this, works with families who are moving into permanent housing after experiencing homelessness or with folks who are leaving domestic violence situations and need a place to be. So I

said, "You are welcome to all of them." And he loaded them up in his Ford, took almost everything and rehoused them with these families in homes of their own where I suspect many of them are today.

See, one of the most important spiritual acts and practices we can have is to keep basically using our life for some good. I know it sounds simple, but you make some good from what we have, where I suspect that sometimes it's hard to do that, but it makes opportunities for care for our neighbors closer when we do. I know in this week to hear this, make something good of your life, is hard. We have attacks that are happening in Las Vegas and in New Orleans and the pain of the senseless violence being perpetuated around the globe in an endless grasp for power. It is hard to think about the good life. And I know in this week when we lost one of the finest examples of humanity, Jimmy Carter, talk about lead an example of a good life, talk about something hard to do. This morning they said on the radio he crammed a lot into a hundred years.

But it's hard in a week that starts a year that many of us fear will hold grave challenges. And I don't mean to make light of that. It's hard. But no one here is doing it alone. Hear that. We make a start on this year together, we start to let go of what we don't need anymore together. And trust that more ideas, more creativity, more beauty, more inspiration will flow in. When we let those go, ask any artist, any writer, painter, creator, what you got to do with your best ideas? You get them down on paper, you get them out so more can flow in. That's how we kindle a spirit, not at once, not twice, not every once in a while a few times a year. It's a continual burning. The eternal flame we have that lights and fires every action that we are taking, whether we like it or not, day and night, night and day to keep burning the life we offer in this world until we render it at last as sacred, I will live. I will live. I will keep living until everyone is okay.

So the lesson here I hope is clear. If you really have faith, just burn down your house and test your neighbors. Then you'll know. No, that's not it. It's in these communities that my friends had in this neighborhood of a quarter mile of our churches, knowing where someone was when they needed to be among our friends, among my friends' coworkers, among these communities that joined forces when the house was on fire. And I know some of us are worried that the house, our hair and most of the dumpsters we can find are going to be on fire pretty soon.

At our talk here at 12:30 with David Marquis, he has something to say about this in his book. He shares some of the wisdom and strength he draws from his long friendship with the great Molly Ivins and from her twin truths, she told him, her words, "There's always something else to be angry about. There's always something else to laugh about out." And he goes on to say this about it, his words, "There will always be just cause for the work of goodness. And don't lose your laughter in the process. It keeps the heart flexible and the spirit lively. It replenishes us and it makes the anger sustainable. A conflagration will burn down the house. A long slow burn will warm the hearth." Yeah, that's nice David. He's over there.

He continues, "Take your anger out on the problem, not other people. If you fall into the trap of finger-pointing and name-calling, then you have justified that behavior for your opponent. If you can't laugh along the way and you don't conduct yourself honorably, you won't last." Yeah. The first act we're

taking together here as a church is to hold in our hand something maybe we are resisting or something that is resisting us, something that is holding us back and we want to release it, to relinquish it, to burn it. I implore you when we do this in these moments to come not to try to burn any distant thing or person you want gone from the world. I'm not going to be checking your answers, but I implore you as your minister not to use it to point a spiritual finger, to take David's words.

Survey the landscape inside, turn inward, gaze with love always when we look inward with love at your soft spiritual underbelly. See what is true to you now and choose what you must be free of and how you will kindle the hearth of the soul and keep it warm. How you will kindle your precious spirit friends, and they are precious, by letting this thing go, by choosing to do so. At the heart of this faith I love so well and at the heart of all of the world's true faiths, I believe, is the right, is the dignity, is the freedom to choose. And I pray with you now as you choose what it is you wish to free yourself of, of something that will help you to love better your world, your neighbor and yourself in freedom. So take your paper now, having your instructions. If you don't have them, raise your hand and an usher might help you get one. Or tear off a corner of something or share with your neighbor. There's many pencils and pens which might also have to be shared. And write down that thing.

Oh, sorry. Now hold it in your hands. Some of you may still be writing. And see, feel now this thing, feel what this thing is that is holding you back. What letting it go might mean for you. What new energy or purpose might be fed by relinquishing it now? What river might yet flow again? What may have served you, serves you no more. Make of this thing a sacrifice, which only means to render something sacred. That's where the word comes from. Sacred in gratitude, sacred in love. May we each, may we all make this sacrifice as the fuel to spark a new way and to kindle the spirit of creation in each one of us. The spirit of love in this church community and the spirit of hope in a world that is in such great need of it. May that ever be so blessed be and amen.

Now, some directions. We're going to be burning things in the sanctuary. So we're going to exercise care. We're going to look out for little fingers and less nimble fingers and maybe help them with the burning process. We're going to start on the sides and in the balcony, the front rows of the sides will go toward the back of the sanctuary, then come down to the front to burn, then go up the stairs and back into your pew. I said in the first service, this is the most balletic performance of ministry we do every year. Same with the balcony will come down. Basically the rule is follow your ushers.

For the center section, this is important. You'll come down alternating sides to burn something as Doric is about to demonstrate. But when you do, when you're waiting to burn something, please stand against the wooden sides of the aisles because what's going to happen is once you burn it, you're going to cross in front and go back up to your pew so that you can easily go right back to where you were. Does that make sense? In a nice circle. So if you're standing against the wood, then the people passing in front and going back to their pews can get there. All right, this is what they send you to divinity school to do. This is it.

One last thing. If your paper has some of the foil kind of thing on it, please note that has the dual attribute of being both sticky and highly flammable. So maybe don't grip it from that part when you're

dropping it in the flame. Also folding it like this in half long ways is a very good way for it to burn quickly and easily. Okay, so holding what we have in our hands, letting go what we are in our hearts. I invite you, I implore you now to let go, to release, to relinquish these things now with the winnowing fire of commitment. Come forward now.

Good job. Please rise now and join together in a community blessing. The words are on the back of your order of service. We're going to say them together. We're going to speak together the Kol Nidre, adapted by Reverend Mark Belletini in community together, will say the words now. Now all here are set free to be themselves, not slaves to pressure, duty or habit. Each and every commitment to unswerving behavior or opinion by consent of the community that stands in this place is now nullified, canceled and made not. Now all here are set free. We who have often said yes when we meant no and no when we meant yes from all busyness committed before the altar of guilt.

We are set free from our choices of the lesser good and from all burdens we have carried longer than we should. May we all be at one with each other, with our past, with all nature, and with the mystery transcending all language and praise. Now we begin our lives anew as free people. As we cross the boundaries of year and year, we nullify the false walls we have created. May true at-one-ment come and the new year begin with perfect and refreshing peace. Amen.