

Faith on Fire!  
 Hebrews 12:18-29  
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 August 22, 2010

"Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire, O still, small voice of calm." That was the last line of our prayer song, from one of my favorite hymns, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind." The text is by John Greenleaf Whittier, a Quaker poet from New England. Whittier was one of the Fireside poets, called so because his poems were for the common people and would be recited as the family gathered around the fire.

Gathering around a fireplace gives a warm, cozy feeling.

Whittier imagined God's "still small voice of calm," and would have worshiped at a Friends' meetinghouse in silence, as Quakers do. He would have been against violence and war in his tradition. But Whittier was no meek and quiet man. Whittier was an ardent advocate for the abolition of slavery in the United States. He used his pen to write a fiery pamphlet condemning slavery in 1833 and dedicated 20 years of his life to the abolitionist cause. He truly took on the controversy of his age. We could say that Whittier stepped into the fire.

The image of fire is not always warm and cozy. It can be blazing and frightening.

Paul Tillich says that faith is having an "ultimate concern" about what matters in life. Whatever truly concerns a person is what that person calls holy. Our "ultimate concern" becomes our life orientation—be it relationship with the divine, or money, or a focus on ego, or whatever. And because there is always some uncertainty about who or what God is, it takes courage to have faith in God. To have faith means accepting a certain amount of ambiguity. At least, Tillich would say, having a *dynamic* faith means having courage to deal with uncertainty and accepting that at the heart of God is mystery. We will never know for sure, by logic or scientific proof, who or what God is. And yet, if we have courage to look deeply at what is most important, we will cultivate a deep concern about life and reality, as we know it. This we can call faith, this deep concern, an "ultimate concern." So this way of looking at faith is not to think of faith as a specific belief. Rather, having faith is being so concerned about human existence that we seek to be in a close and dynamic relationship with God, the creator (*Dynamics of Faith*, 1957).

The term "ultimate concern" is pretty strong. And it takes a heap of "courage" to take on this "ultimate concern." It seems that there is something unknown and even fearful about taking such a step. Having faith is like taking a step into the fire.

On my first Sunday here at St. John's, the first Sunday in July 2009, a young woman met me at the door at the end of the service. She said it was her first Sunday too. Her name is Lynda Berg. She had just come back from Haiti: her hair was in dreadlocks, she was majoring in religious studies, soon to graduate, and she had all kinds

of questions about theology and Bible, and she was "on fire." I met with her and we explored her thoughts about a call to ministry. Some of you read her impressions from her time in Haiti in our newsletter, *The Mustard Seed*. Some of you heard Lynda speak at our Church Council after she came back from a second trip to Haiti, after the earthquake last January. This week Lynda is starting seminary at Duke Divinity School.

Lynda has some "ultimate concerns." She is concerned about the children growing up in Haiti without parents. She is concerned about the poverty there, and the political and economic systems of our world that allow poverty to exist. She doesn't have the answers, but she certainly has the concern. And she seems to have the courage to stay in the heat of the fire.

Another young woman, Charli Lighty, 24, flew from California to Springfield, Massachusetts this week to help rebuild the Macedonia Church of God in Christ. This is a predominantly black church that was burned down on election night in 2008, when Barack Obama was elected president. Two young white men have pleaded guilty and a third is awaiting trial on charges that they burned the church to protest the election of the nation's first black president. This young woman, Charli, from California is a Mt. Holyoke graduate and a member of Glendale First United Methodist Church. She is now working in Springfield, Massachusetts to show that though this black church was burned to the ground, out of the ashes a new church will be reborn. Hatred will not be permitted to stand and have the last word (CBS local news, August 16, 2010).

Fire can be destructive. It can cause loss of property, loss of life, in this case, loss of justice and nearly loss of hope. But God speaks through the fire, as God spoke to Moses through the burning bush. God called Moses to be a spokesman for the people of Israel who were in slavery. God called Moses to go to Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go!"

In the *Press Democrat*, you may have read about a local man, Brother Toby, who nearly 35 years ago made the choice to be a contemplative monk in the Starcross Monastic Order and settle in a quiet corner of Sonoma County, in Annapolis. He was going to grow Christmas trees and provide a home for a few homeless kids from the city. Then the AIDS epidemic hit. "It absolutely turned us around," Toby said. Monastic serenity went out the window! Brother Toby's order became the guardian for babies born with AIDS starting in 1986. One baby became ill and according to the newspaper, the Annapolis firefighters heard the emergency call for help and did not respond. There was such prejudice against AIDS victims at the time, even babies. One baby, though, David McCarroll, is now 24. His birthmother wanted an abortion, but Brother Toby offered an open adoption. Now David is a gifted violinist, having earned his Master's Degree from the New England Conservatory of Music (*Press Democrat*, August 16, 2010).

What made Brother Toby step into the fire and take the risk of going against public fear to raise babies born with AIDS? He said hearing about AIDS babies "turned [his life] around." We might say his life was turned inside out. Instead of looking inward, he began to look outward.

You know how you have a favorite, warm sweatshirt, one that you like to wear on foggy mornings because it's fuzzy on the inside and feels so good close to your skin? What if you turned the sweatshirt inside out? What if you turned the warm, fuzzy side out, toward the needs of others instead of toward yourself?

When we are on-fire with faith, we are oriented outwardly. Our "ultimate concern" is for God and our neighbor, not for ourselves.

In the Book of Hebrews, the scripture passage we heard today compares that which we can touch to that which we cannot touch. It compares Mt. Sinai where God spoke to Moses out of the fire, with Mt. Zion. At Mt. Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments, there was fear of God, and the people did not want to go up the mountain or touch the fire. The fire was frightening and out of it came God's voice and stone tablets with commandments for how to live in community. Moses came down from the mountain to people who had lost faith in Yahweh. And then he taught them the Great Commandment that God had given him, out of the fire and the cloud and the darkness, a commandment that they were to observe in the land that they were soon to cross into and occupy: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." God was saying through Moses, "This should be your 'ultimate concern'. I, Yahweh, should be your 'ultimate concern'."

At the other mountain, Mt. Zion, or Jerusalem, the heavenly city, the writer says we are to find Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. The writer of Hebrews says that here at this second, heavenly "mountain" there is no concrete place to touch, no fire to fear, but a "kingdom that cannot be shaken." The new covenant is with us wherever we are. It is not limited to a mountain or to a temple. It is a spiritual presence, the heart of Christ. We carry it wherever we go.

So, in juxtaposition we have God in the fire and God through Jesus Christ in our hearts. Both are aspects of God: God of fire and God of love, the fire that pushes us out into the world, and the love that centers our living.

The scripture passage ends with "For God is a consuming fire" (12:29). Faith in God is full of fire. It is passionate and sometimes destructive. It may even be all consuming. The Book of Hebrews that we have been studying in sermons this month is difficult to understand. It testifies to beliefs of the Old Testament. The book is written to the people called Hebrews, but these are Christian people, followers of Christ. The Book of Hebrews reviews parts of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), but it points to the new covenant as the ultimate concern.

And we know that Jesus lived out the beliefs of the Old Testament, for it was his Bible. (Of course the New Testament hadn't been written yet!) He understood the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor, and he preached on it and went to the cross for it.

We carry in us the still small voice of God that comes to us through the earthquake, wind, and fire—Through the earthquake of Haiti, through the turbulent wind on the seas that brought slaves to this country, and through the fire set in a church burned down in a hate crime. Even in all this disaster and tribulation, God speaks to individuals who are so grabbed by their faith, their "ultimate concern," that they turn themselves inside out. They look not at their own needs but to the needs of others. When "God is a consuming fire" there is no turning back.