



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 13
Proper 17(A)

Unquenchable Love

[RCL]: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Moses' first response to the burning bush was curiosity: "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." By the end of his life, though, did Moses instead wonder at how appropriate this manifestation of God was—that God would be known in something that burns continually, a fire that never dims to embers, never dulls to cinders, never cools to ash?

Moses got to see, as he led the people (or tried to), that God's passion for them would not die, even if more than once that passion flamed into frustration when people would not do what they knew to be right, what they had promised they would do. Even if God's passion more than once flared into anger because of their repeated disobedience, God never becomes lukewarm about them. God's heart gets broken more than once, but the flame of God's love never goes out.

That fire that burns within the heart of God—for justice, for righteousness, for all God's children to live in love with one another, for all God's creation to exist in harmony—in short, the passion of God which is love, which never dies, never grows cold, is never extinguished, would cause Moses pain as well, because being close to intense heat hurts. Many, many years after Moses, Martin Luther would say, "The Goodness of God is nothing but burning love and a glowing oven full of love."¹

At first listen, drawing close to a glowing oven sounds cozy, but let's be real. It's hard to live aligned with such passion, such intensity, such heat.

Moses would also know the pain of such passion because his work was never done. A moment never came when Moses could say, "Well, that's over now." As Moses followed, did what God commanded, spoke for God, showed people the heart of God, the heart of Moses also would repeatedly break and burn and never, not in this life, know the relief of a job finished, of a people completely righteous, of justice fully lived, of neighbors entirely loved, of commandments totally kept, obedience utterly given, beloved community once and for all realized.

¹ Luther, *Werke* 36:425.

So, yes, Moses first came to see the bush, curious about “this great sight,” but by the end of his life, maybe he understood better that to follow such a God is to know heartbreak and to feel as if one has been burned. It means having to commit a lot of things to the flames—letting what is worthless, unholy, unwholesome be incinerated. It means being tried and purified and refined, as if by fire. It means letting oneself be aglow with God’s Spirit, being rekindled and rekindled and rekindled, which, frankly, is allowing oneself to be put to the flame and caught alight over and over and over again.

Maybe Moses had an inkling of this, though, even at the outset, even as he was untying his sandals and hiding his face, because as soon as this burning, afire, a-flaming God tells Moses where Moses comes into the plan, Moses starts firing off excuses, four in rapid-fire succession. We hear only the first two in today’s reading, but you can keep going and find them easily: I’m not enough. I don’t know enough. People won’t believe me or listen to me. I’m not a good enough speaker. Moses tops it off by finally saying, “Send someone else,” which is basically the same as “I just don’t want to.”

God sticks with Moses, though. God doesn’t say, “You’re right, you’re such a loser, and you don’t even want this job. What was I thinking? Put your shoes back on and move along. Next!”

This glowing-oven-full-of-love God says, “Go. This won’t be easy on you. Me neither. This is going to hurt both of us, a lot. But this is the nature of love: not to give up, to listen to the cry of people, to do what needs to be done to set people free, to show them again and again what a holy, obedient life lived in love of God and neighbor looks like. So, let’s do this.”

God wouldn’t accept Moses’ excuses. Maybe part of it was that God has a habit of choosing unlikely people, people whose power is clearly not from themselves, to do God’s work. But maybe part of it was that Moses wasn’t just saying no to God, Moses was saying no to God’s people.

Think about this for a moment. God tells Moses why God calls him: my people are suffering, and still Moses says no. I’m not . . . I can’t. . . I don’t. . . I won’t. God’s heart must have broken, the wound in the center of God must have been a little more seared. God had given Moses life and everything he needed, and offered him even more now as Moses ripped through his list of reasons God was wrong to ask him to do something, not just for God, whom he couldn’t see except in this burning bush, but for people God loves, whom he could see, if he would just say a simple, “Here am I, send me.”

But no, says Moses. That had to hurt God’s heart more than a little.

But God’s burning love wouldn’t go out. And at the end of this encounter, Moses would go and would feel his own heart singed, seared, scarred, because God’s unquenchable love is not an easy thing, a weak or dull thing. And although a blazing fire can be awesome, it’s more terrifying than majestic, more fearful than glorious.

And when Jesus reveals God's uncontainable love most decisively, he shows it – not in something that soothes and calms and cools, but on a cross. Jesus would show God's unrestrainable love, not in pyrotechnics, not by calling down fire on his enemies, but in suffering himself.

To follow our afire, a-flaming God of unquenchable love, we must pick up our own cross and walk the way of love.

Our reading from Romans shows us what this kindled love looks like. It's not a catalog of nice actions, with love leading the list. Scholars like James D.G. Dunn remind us that here, love is the command, and what follows is this love spelled out, illuminated.² Hear the passion, the energy, the effort in this love. Genuine love: hating what is evil, being devoted to what is good; showing a familial love for one another; outdoing one another in showing honor; being unflagging in energy; being aglow with the Spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; remaining steadfast in suffering; persisting in prayer; sharing in the needs of the saints; striving to show hospitality to strangers.

Read the whole passage again. Commit it to memory. Use it as a checklist, a litmus test, a thermometer to check your own temperature. This way of love that reflects God's passion is brilliant and big and not easy; a way of life that we might be more eager to douse and dampen, make innocuous and dim, rather than risk the kind of pain that comes with being set ablaze.

God's love burns on.

Ours? Does it share God's pain, reflect God's ardor, God's intensity? Or do we hasten to put our shoes back on, hurry along, pretend we never saw the bush, heard the call, sat at the foot of the cross, and wondered what kind of a God loves like this?

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² James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, p. 738. The wording in this list is based on his commentary.